

## "It's like the Body Snatchers!" by ChangeTheCircumstances

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Billy gets worse before he gets better, Child Abuse, Emotional Abuse, F/M, Family Drama, Gen, M/M, Possession, Post-Season/Series 02, Slow Burn, Supernatural Elements, both for Max&Billy and Billy/Steve, delving into Max and Billy's family life

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Other Characters, Sam Owens (Stranger Things), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove & Nancy Wheeler, Billy Hargrove & Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Other Relationships, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-11-24

**Updated:** 2017-12-31

**Packaged:** 2022-04-03 15:08:34

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 11

**Words:** 107,836

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Max wonders if her life will ever be normal again, if anything can be normal in a place like Hawkins. She doubts it but there's at least one thing she's sure of: the last person to ever realize what's really going on in this crazy place will be Billy. No way would anything supernatural ever happen to him.

## 1. Prologue: That's Unusual

### Author's Note:

So this is my first Stranger Things story and I'm looking forward to writing more. Since the chapters are planned to be pretty long, I'm not sure when the next chapter will be out but I'll try to take time to write as often as possible. There will probably be between five and ten chapters but not positive how many exactly yet.

Also, I just wanted to state I'm not actually sure if I'll end up doing a Steve/Billy relationship but I do know I'm going to go into some more interactions between the two and on the chance I do, I figured I'd go ahead and tag it so those that don't like the relationship can avoid it. Anyways, thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy!

Max didn't expect her life to immediately go back to normal and she was kind of wondering if that was even a possibility now. Even with the gate closed and most of her questions answered, she knew things definitely weren't normal with Billy. They hadn't really talked and what few words had passed between them were pretty meaningless anyways. What mattered was that he'd backed off. It also meant she was without a ride most of the time but seeing as most of her friends rode their bikes and she had her skateboard, she honestly didn't mind. Besides, if she really needed a ride somewhere she could call on Steve or Will's mom to help out.

That was how things went, past the Snowball Dance and winter break. Everyone was kind of out of their usual routine during that time and it was pretty hard for Neil and her mom to keep perfect eyes on herself or Billy. That changed once school started though. Not right away. There were a few weeks of mostly peace and any hell from home was pushed aside with the time she got to spend with Lucas and her new friends. She'd even gotten to meet Eleven a few more times though it became rarer what with school starting again. The police chief was also pretty damn protective and it seemed she

wouldn't really get to hang out with the girl until a year passed and she was able to take her new name.

Either way, Max didn't really have time to focus on Eleven or the mystical crap because school was starting to kick her ass now that she had a reason to actually work to stay in this particular one. She stuck with her own schedule, Billy occasionally dropping her off in the morning. A lot of times she would leave before he could though, and after school Steve often took her and the others to the arcade.

It was almost like she had a whole new family.

Not to seem completely heartless, she did love her mom even if she still didn't forgive her for marrying Neil and moving here. But at least what she felt for Lucas and Dustin and Will and Mike wasn't really marred by any life altering events, not in a negative way anyhow.

So life...it wasn't perfect but it was good. Max was pretty damn content and she'd even chalked up the nerve to kiss Lucas again which had felt great. It was all so good...

...for exactly three weeks after winter break. That was how long the good lasted until she'd been a bit late coming home. She saw Billy's car and Neil's in the driveway. She didn't see her mom's, probably out grocery shopping, so she decided to try and avoid the likely fighting by going straight to her bedroom window.

She'd seen how Billy and Neil fought and it almost always put a smile on her face, watching Billy walk out in anger either towards his car or to his room like some kicked mutt. She'd even caught sight of Neil slapping him once and she'd had to cover her mouth from letting a satisfied laugh out. It was wrong, she understood that and she sure as hell wouldn't have ever let her own mom or dad treat her like that no matter what. But she'd always figured Billy deserved it for one reason or another. Why else would Neil feel like he had to do it?

Still, she wasn't in the mood to witness all that so she went through her bedroom window anyways. As she eased her feet onto the floor, a loud bang caused her to drop her skateboard. It came from Billy's room next door and she silently cursed as apparently the fight was still in progress and they both had to be in there.

Max held her breath, hoping that they wouldn't come in...just please...please...

He came in without even knocking the bastard. "Maxine. When did you get here?" asked Neil.

"Just now sir. I...I was trying to be quiet."

"Well it's alright. How did you get home?"

"I skateboarded," she politely replied. She could have a pretty bad attitude from time to time with others but she'd decided early on to at least not risk it with Neil.

"Well next time tell me if Billy doesn't take you home. It's supposed to be his responsibility and if he doesn't, I need to know so I can fix it," Neil said, completely serious. "Understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Make sure you're at the table by six. Your mother's cooking dinner tonight."

And like that, Neil had disappeared thank god. Max's shoulders relaxed and she sat on her bed, getting ready to start some homework when she jumped again, another bang coming from Billy's room. Apparently their conversation hadn't been finished.

Max decided to stay in her room for the next few minutes just in case before she ran out to grab a drink of water. It seemed to be a good idea as there was another bang and Max wondered if it was Billy or Neil who threw the thing. Just a little longer and...now *that* she at least knew was the sound of a door being slammed. Probably Billy running off or Neil going to the living room to drink and watch TV.

Avoiding either would be easy enough now and Max went out to grab a glass. She had to pass Billy's room on the way over and she could see the door must have been slammed open and then the force of the push had caused it to swing back. It gave her a limited view into his room but it was still something. Max could just barely see all the macho teenage stuff that she could give two craps about.

Her eyes fell on Billy right away though, at least what she could see of him. Max froze, now deadly afraid of what Billy might do if he actually caught her staring. But it didn't seem like he would notice her, not right now as he...cried?

She'd never seen Billy cry. It seemed as possible as the Upside Down had when Lucas first told her but...well since that was real then why couldn't this be?

Ever so slowly, Max stepped back and quickly went into her room, deciding she'd get something to drink later once her mom was home.

She tried to turn to her homework, it should have been easy, but all she could do was think about those tears and whether or not it had happened before. She started to feel guilt well up over every other time she'd smiled over Neil yelling at him but she quickly pushed those thoughts away. So what if he had? Billy was a dick and deserved it and this was just another messed up day in the Hargrove-Mayfield household.

Yeah, that was it.

After thinking that, Max finally relaxed and turned back to her textbooks.

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Max said it in passing when one of her friends mentioned the odd disappearance and Dustin simply snorted, "Good riddance."

"He do this a lot?" asked Lucas.

"For a few hours, sure, but not days," sighed Max. So far it had been two since Billy hadn't shown up and neither her mom nor Neil could find him or his car.

Will's brow knitted together. "Are you worried?"

"What do you think?" Mike said with a roll of his eyes.

"Course I'm not worried. Like Dustin said, good riddance," muttered Max. "But it's been causing problems for Neil which will cause problems for my mom and that's less cool."

“What if it’s the Upside Down?” Dustin excitedly whispered.

“Don’t even joke about that!” hissed Mike, all eyes falling to Will for a split second.

If the comment had upset him though, he didn’t show it as he said, “El closed it guys. She defeated the Mind Flayer. We’re good, right?”

“Of course we are,” muttered Lucas. “Billy is just a massive douche who ran off somewhere and we’re better off for it.”

Max shrugged in agreement. “He is only a few months away from being eighteen. He’s talked about leaving before. Maybe he finally just took a chance.”

“From what little we’ve interacted, I wouldn’t be surprised,” Dustin muttered. “And anyways, why are we talking about that ass when we’ve got this tournament still going on. Much better topic.”

“We don’t really need to do this, do we guys? We all know I’ll win anyways,” smirked Max.

“Like hell you will. Come on,” Mike retorted as they all rushed the machine, quarters in hand.

It was easy to forget about Billy as they went back and forth. Even better, Will’s mom had invited everyone over for dinner so Max was busy laughing and joking and teasing each of her new friends through most of the evening. It was great but then, that seemed to be what her life was like. Things were great, until they weren’t. And they always seemed to be ‘weren’t’ the moment she walked into her house.

After Will’s mom had dropped her off at home and she’d gone inside, her eyes fell on her own mom restlessly pacing back and forth. She could hear Neil yelling in the kitchen. Max honestly wasn’t too sure why Neil was getting this worked up considering half the time he didn’t even seem to want Billy around, yet he was cursing up a storm in there.

“Oh Maxine-oh I’m sorry but we’re just—”

"I'm guessing you haven't found him," she murmured as her mom came close.

"No, we haven't. Sweetheart, do you know—"

"Told you everything I did. No idea where he is," muttered Max. "I've got homework I need to finish before I go to bed."

"Of course sweetheart. Just know you can always talk to me. You know that right?"

Max just shrugged and slipped back out of her mom's grasp before quickly walking off to her room. Billy's door was open and she chanced a glance in. The place was a complete mess, probably because of Neil tearing it apart. Max wouldn't be surprised that if any clues were hiding in there, they'd been unintentionally destroyed by Neil's chaos.

There wasn't exactly anything she could do so she just turned back towards her room and went inside.

She didn't think about Billy again until she was ready to go to bed and then Dustin's comment drifted back into her head. No...it couldn't possibly be about the Upside Down. For one thing, the gate was closed and for another, if anything strange started happening, the last person that would be involved would be Billy. That she was sure of.

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"Where the hell have you been?!" yelled Max after she'd gotten over her initial shock. She was happy that Will was off with his mom, Lucas was with a teacher, Dustin off with Steve, and Mike going with Hopper to visit Eleven because this wouldn't have gone any better with all of them here. "You've been gone for over a week!"

She marched forward expecting...something. But there was no anger or explanation in his eyes. He was just kind of...blank in an odd way.

"Get in the car Max."

"You haven't driven me home in a month. I can get home just fine," she grumbled. Whatever crisis Billy was dealing with and whatever

reason as to why he was back, Max didn't care and she really didn't want to deal with it. She went by and when Billy still didn't react, she figured this would actually be pretty easy. No fight, god what a relief

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“Hey!”

Last minute, Billy grabbed her arm. Max tried to pull away but he held tight. His grip was even more painful than last time but there was no screaming that went with it. He didn't yell in her face or shoot her one of those nasty glares. It...was almost like it wasn't Billy.

He repeated it. The words not quite calm but...just plain. Plain and expressionless. “Get in the car Max.”

Finger by finger, he let go. Max resisted the urge to pull away, fearing he'd grab her again if she made to quick of a motion. She watched him like a wild animal which was ironic considering the fact that this was the most unruffled he'd ever acted around her minus the time she'd drugged him.

Max got into the car. She didn't take her eyes off Billy and that brought up even more questions as he didn't yell anything like ‘stop staring at me’ or ‘god don't be such a zombie freak’. Nothing rude and unnecessary or cruel. He just started driving and kept driving. He didn't even turn any music up.

“Where...where were you?” It took ages for Max to gather up the courage to ask that despite how she didn't even think he'd answer.

...She was right. He didn't answer. She whispered it once more but he didn't even react. Usually she would have growled out something. Something stupid like ‘what are you, deaf now?’ but she kept her mouth shut.

This had to be one of the longest car rides with Billy she'd ever had. It felt like hours had passed as he didn't even react. God, what was wrong with him? Did he get hit on the head? Have partial amnesia and only remembered the bits and pieces? It was the only answer Max could come up with that made some sense and it was obvious



she wasn't going to get anything out of Billy anyways.

She just stayed silent and resisted the urge to bolt the moment they were home and the car was stopped. Some small part thought Billy would grab her again but he didn't and Max managed to get to her room without any other incident. She really wished she had a lock on the door but if she really needed to, she was pretty sure she could drag her desk over to the door and block it.

Max spent the rest of her afternoon looking at the chapter she was supposed to read for class but that's all she did. Look at it. She wished she was closer to the other houses. They'd planned to get her a walkie-talkie but even if she already had one, it did little good what with the distance between their houses and hers. She could sneak out the window and go find one of them but as creepy as all this was, she was kind of curious what would happen once Neil and her mom got home. Maybe they'd get the answers she couldn't.

It was late when they did arrive but Max could tell from the screeching tires outside. Neil had to be driving and he had to have spotted Billy's car.

Max waited a second to see if the confrontation would happen in the living room or Billy's. When she didn't hear anyone storming past her door, she guessed they were all in the living room and carefully crept out. The moment her door was open she heard Neil and it only got louder as she moved towards the living room. She could see her mom first and her heart did a painful twinge. Why did she have to marry this asshole? She wouldn't have gone through so much damn heartache if she hadn't.

There wasn't anything about that which could be done now though and Max didn't want to run into the middle of this, even if it was to comfort her mom. She stayed in the shadows instead, watched as Neil yelled at Billy the same question Max had tried to get him to answer.

"Where the hell were you?! No one was here to take care of Max! You had Susan worried sick! Why the hell did you just leave!?"

Considering those few times when Max had seen them fight, Billy had been more on the defense than offense so his silence wasn't too

surprising. What was though was how he still looked kind of blank, like he saw what was happening but it wasn't affecting him.

"I just needed a break from everything."

"You needed a break? A break son? Did nothing we talk about last time get through your thick skull!!!"

Max flinched when the first hit came and again with the second and third. She'd always assumed that any thudding that came from the Hargroves was them throwing things. They'd done it before. But similar to when she'd seen Billy crying, Max started to wonder exactly how many times Neil had hit his son.

It was on the third slap that Max noticed a reaction-finally! Something that she recognized as pure Billy, anger and embarrassment. So he was still in there. She watched as Billy's mouth turned up ever so slightly into one of his ugly sneers and emotion came back into his voice.

"I just needed a break—"

"You don't get to make that call!!!" Neil yelled and he hit him again only this time it wasn't a slap but a punch, hard and weighted as it connected to Billy's jaw and he dropped to the ground. Max's mouth fell open and for a split second she wasn't seeing her asshole of a step-brother. She was just seeing a kid getting the shit beat out of him by his dad.

She'd been scared to death of the demodogs and the whole Upside Down and Mind Flayer thing but this...this was a different kind of fear. There was no hairs standing on the back of her neck and she felt no reason to scream or flee. She just felt...numb. Numb and cold and though it was a completely different situation, she couldn't help but imagine if this was what Will had felt. Just this creeping sensation that ran through her veins.

"You do not get to choose when you do and do not accept responsibilities! You will never leave again and you will never disappoint Maxine or Susan again! Do you understand me!? Do you!?"

By this point, Billy had dragged himself back up. He was breathing heavily and Max could see the mixture of anger and pain on his face along with whatever little emotion she'd identified when she'd spotted him crying.

"Yes...sir."

Neil leaned in and whispered something that Max couldn't hear but she watched the shiver run through Billy and how he quickly nodded his head. When Neil finally moved back, she expected Billy to run out the front door again but considering this fight had happened because he'd disappeared, Max supposed it made sense that he'd run to his room instead.

Max quickly backed up but she couldn't help but glance at Billy's face as he passed and her eyes went wide.

The first few seconds, he looked like how she would expect, enraged and looking like he wanted to either destroy something or start crying. But then he blinked and...Max watched his expression change. It changed from what Billy was supposed to look like to what he had looked like when he'd shown up, when he was in the car. Just a blink of the eye and he was flat...expressionless.

With Billy completely past her, she ran into her room, closed the door, and shoved her desk in front of it without a second thought. She wasn't sure what she was protecting herself from. Some conversation with Neil and her mom or Billy but she did it anyways, curling up on her bed and gripping her hands so tight her knuckles were starting to lose color.

Her mind ran with all sorts of ideas, both purely rational and ones involving the Upside Down. What the hell was happening?

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"Get in you little shit before you make me late."

Max slowly did, her eyes wide as she stared at her step-brother.

"Stop being such a god damn creep and stare at something else why don't ya?" growled Billy as he turned on his cassette player and

twisted the volume knob until it was almost all the way up.

Had she dreamed it all?

Max couldn't be sure but the worry she'd felt yesterday was starting to disappear as she just saw asshole, dickhead Billy. Maybe something significant had happened to him while he'd been gone and he'd just been freaking out over it. And whatever had happened didn't necessarily have to do with the Upside Down or the supernatural. She didn't think Billy did drugs but hey, drugs would at least make sense and it was an easy explanation.

"I said stop staring you damn freak."

Max just rolled her eyes and turned to look out the window. She wouldn't exactly use the word 'comforting' but that was the best way she could describe having Billy back. She at least knew how to deal with actual Billy. Not the emotionless one.

She shook her head at the memory and hoped she'd never have to see that again or whatever went down with Neil. If they had more of a connection, Max might have asked about it, tried to find some way to comfort him. She wasn't stupid after all. She wouldn't be surprised if Billy was still choked up over that even if his asshole personality was back in place.

But for the most part, Max didn't care about Billy and vice versa. No point in trying to do something that Billy obviously wouldn't want.

She just rested against the seat and listened to the blasting rock music as the wind whipped by.

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"Hey Eleven, can we talk?"

Max and the kids were at Hopper's cabin for the first time in almost two months. Despite Hawkins Lab being gone, some talk of new government people coming in had Hopper being more protective than usual. Once that threat was gone though, Hopper had made up for his over protectiveness with having all the kids over for a little party. Despite the fact that Max wouldn't call her and Eleven friends,

she'd been invited too.

Now the boys got their D&D campaign set up that they'd apparently planned for weeks just for this party. It would be Eleven's and Max's first time playing so a good chunk of time was going to be put aside to explain all the rules to them but that also meant they had a chance at a moment alone. Max wondered if Eleven would actually accept and for several tense seconds, Max didn't breathe.

Eleven nodded.

Max's shoulders relaxed and she followed the girl into her room. It was a bit more private but Eleven didn't close the door and Max didn't see a reason to push her to.

"I just...I wanted to say I know I'm the new kid and I don't think I ever apologized for kind of just...shoving my way in. I do want to be your friend though. If...you don't mind. I mean, all of them back there are great and what not but having a girl friend my age would be nice. You know?"

Max hesitated, trailing off as she waited for some type of answer. The problem with Eleven was that it was difficult to say when she was talking over her or not. Max started to wonder if she should say more just as Eleven seemed to focus on her again.

"I was new kid. I understand," she finally murmured. She suddenly stuck out her hand, the motion clearly mimicked from others she'd seen but it wasn't a familiar gesture. "Friend."

"Uh cool. Yeah, friend," Max said with a small smile as they both shook on it.

Eleven walked passed her, apparently marking the conversation as done but Max would count the small talk a victory all the same. It was the most words Eleven had ever said to her after all and that had to count for something.

Max walked out and saw that the guys had left their D&D planning for what Hopper was setting out for them. They were crowded around what looked like mini towers of waffles and sugar. She

couldn't help but make a face despite the fact that she clearly saw how Eleven's lit up.

"You really like this?"

"Hey, anything Eggo don't knock it or El will mind bend you across the room," grinned Dustin.

Everyone rolled their eyes as Eleven was quick to be the first one to sit and scarf down the monstrosity before her. Max wasn't quite there for it but hey, at least Eleven seemed to be enjoying it.

They ended up bringing their Eggo, sugar towers over to the D&D table and played all Saturday. It took a while for Max to really get into the flow of it all but once she was there she had to admit it was pretty fun.

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"Let go of me! Let go!"

Max was screaming it but it didn't matter. It wasn't like they were in the school parking lot or at home. Billy had pulled off on the side of the road and as far as Max could tell, there really wasn't anything nearby.

"Let go!" she yelled again just as Billy hit her hard. She gaped at him. He'd never done that, not this. Maybe if things were normal she would have chalked it up to Billy just going over the unredeemable deep end with no chance of coming back. Instead, something in the back of her mind started to pull up all those strange moments that hadn't seemed right since his disappearance.

He'd been even angrier and more violent though this was the first time he'd actually singled her out. However, going by Billy's own warped logic and personality, the anger hadn't quite made sense. In a normal context, Billy still never made sense but what had been happening also just wasn't...him.

And she'd like to believe that blank expression hadn't popped up again but she was just being naïve if she really believed that. It had popped up, here and there, and each time Billy had seemed to come

back to himself, he'd just seemed angrier and more distant and less *like* himself, just in a different way than the blank version.

"You ever inconvenience me again and you'll regret it Maxine," hissed Billy. "You'll get more than a damn knock upside the head."

Max desperately nodded in compliance but she couldn't breathe easily even when he let go. Not until she was out of the car and away from him.

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It was nearly summer break and it was at that point school was basically done for the year. Less than a week left in total. That meant skipping class was pretty damn easy as Max and Lucas sat underneath the bleachers, kids running around without a care in the world.

"Max, what happened?"

She winced as Lucas tenderly touched her bruise.

"It's...nothing."

"It's not nothing! It looks like it hurts too," Lucas replied, a frown setting into his face.

"Just family stuff. It won't happen again."

"You mean Billy did this?! I'll kill him Max! I will—"

"No it's-it's not like that. It...you know what? I want you to come home with me. I want to show you something."

"Wait you mean...like be in your room?"

"I've been in your room before," Max muttered with a roll of her eyes.

"Yeah but it's uh...different when it's a guy in a girl's room."

"No it's not stalker. It's just a room. Now do you want to help me or not?"

“Well what are we doing? I know I said I’d kill him but I don’t actually want to go to prison—”

“We’re not going to kill him! There’s just...something I want you to see. It’s weird.”

“Like Billy may be in a drug ring weird or Upside Down weird?”

“Just come with me, will you?”

“Fine! Fine! When do you want me over?”

“As soon as you can. I’m not going to the arcade today so Billy will probably drop me off at home and then run off somewhere.”

“Wait! You’re actually going to get in a car with him. After this!?”

“It took him a while to hit me again. I doubt he’ll do it a third time this soon.”

“You mean he’s done—”

“Just stop arguing with me ok. I’ll see you there in about an hour,” Max replied, giving Lucas their third kiss on the cheek and then running off to the parking lot.

Yesterday Billy had hit her again and she’d had to lie through her teeth that she’d just tripped and hit her head on the edge of her desk. Her mom and Neil had only just bought it but they thankfully didn’t push harder and didn’t seem to make the connection with Billy.

Max had hoped it was a onetime thing, that moment when Billy had pulled over and Max had never felt more scared in her life. But it had happened again, yesterday in fact, and the drastic switch between expressionless and sudden violence was becoming more and more noticeable. She couldn’t ignore it anymore and she had to make a choice now. Either Lucas would assure her that Billy was just a horrendous bully that she should tell her mom about or he’d tell her what she really didn’t want to hear.

That something was off.



While in the car, it was one of the expressionless moments and he left the moment Max was out. At least he was gone for now.

Max ran to her room and waited for Lucas to show up in her backyard. She helped pull him through her window and he paused once on his feet.

“So this...this is what a girl’s room looks like huh?”

“Chill stalker,” snorted Max. “Now come on. This isn’t what I wanted you to see.”

She took his hand and dragged him out of her room and into Billy’s.

“Wait, why are we in here?” asked Lucas.

“I know Steve might have been a better option but...well you’re a boy too. I just...things are wrong. Right?”

“Yeah, it’s too clean,” muttered Lucas. “I’m guessing it’s not usually like this?”

“No not...originally. But it’s been like this for the past few weeks.”

“Max, are you telling me things have been off for that long?”

“Longer-but it’s not like he’s hit me the whole time! That’s been a...uh new development.”

“He’s an ass who’s gotten into cleaning then. Easy enough,” Lucas muttered with a dark look.

“So...you think that’s it?”

“What else could it be?”

“Something...supernatural?”

“You’ve been listening to Dustin too much,” groaned Lucas. “We’ve all agreed Billy’s a horrible human being. This is just next level crap. We should talk to Hopper. He can help you press charges and get that ass out of here.”

“Are you sure—shit!”

Just then it sounded like the front door was being opened and slammed shut.

“Hurry,” hissed Max, dragging Lucas out of Billy’s room and back into her own. Before she could whisper the next step of the plan though, she could just barely hear shouting and realized that Neil and Billy were fighting again in the living room.

She looked to her window and thought about just getting the hell out of there. She’d be killed if either of them caught Lucas in her room but...something pulled her to leave and spy on Neil and Billy again. Something was even more wrong. She could feel it in the air even if the sound of the fight made it seem like any other time before.

Max carefully pushed her door open and headed towards the living room as Neil yelled at Billy for something he’d apparently forgotten to do. As she peaked around the corner, she noted that it seemed just like any other fight and she wondered why it felt wrong at all.

“Why—”

She hushed Lucas with a quick wave, her eyes focused on Billy and Neil. There was yelling and shouting and Billy threw something. Pretty typical. Then things escalated a bit and Neil slapped Billy and Max flinched again as she watched.

It was pretty awful but not—

“Stop it!!!”

Max’s mouth dropped to the floor as she watched Billy scream, grab a lamp, and throw it into his father’s head.

Neil went down, the first hit enough to bring the man to his knees but Billy didn’t stop. He picked up the bottom of the lamp and hit him again and again. Blood flew upwards and hit the couch and ceilings and walls. A howl escaped Billy’s throat and he dropped the lamp, resorting to punching instead. Max watched on horrified until she couldn’t take it anymore. She didn’t care about Neil but at this rate Billy would go so far he wouldn’t be able to return.

“Stop it Billy! You’re killing him!” yelled Max as she jumped out from behind the corner.

Billy froze and then oh so slowly straightened his back. He looked over, the crazed look in his eyes disappearing to show just... confusion. His eyes moved back to the floor, Neil coughing up blood and bubbles popping outwards, spraying the blood further.

He looked so confused and lost. It was wrong. It was all wrong!

“Run...”

Max’s head snapped back to Billy. “What—”

“I said run Max!”

He didn’t have to say it twice. She spun around, grabbed hold of Lucas, and ran back to her room. She left her skateboard behind as she launched herself out the window with Lucas right behind her. He didn’t even have to yell at her to get on, she just did and he immediately started to frantically pedal away from her house. They didn’t stop until they were two blocks away, both wheezing and eyes wide.

“We’ve gotta get Hopper—”

“We need Eleven!” interrupted Max.

“Listen, the Upside Down is closed. Billy’s just flipped his lid and Hopper needs to come and arrest his ass—”

“He told us to run!”

“Yeah, cause he wanted something to chase! He’s probably after us right now! We need to get to Hopper—”

“You didn’t see the look on his face,” stressed Max. “He was confused. He looked like he had no idea what was going on. Something is wrong here and it’s more than Billy’s just gone psycho!”

Lucas hesitated. It was clear he didn’t want to believe her. Dealing with the psychotic Billy was a lot easier than if the Upside Down was

actually open again or something equally insane.

Max didn't back down though. She'd stood by what she'd said and what she'd seen. Something was wrong and not in a normal way at all.

"Fine, Steve's house is closest though. We'll go there and get him to drive us to the cabin."

"What if he's not home?"

"We'll call Hopper or Joyce and get them to pick us up," replied Lucas. "Deal."

"Yeah, fine. That's good enough," Max sighed as she eased back on the bike and gripped him tightly.

The entire way to Steve's house, both couldn't help but glance back and all around, wondering if Billy would actually come after them. Max didn't think actual Billy would. He'd yelled 'run' as a warning, not to start some game. But whatever was eating away at him, was making him do this, that might come after them. Max had no idea what it wanted but it clearly fed off of Billy's anger and what a bottomless pit of energy that must have been.

Sadly, Steve's car wasn't in his driveway so Lucas pedaled into the backyard and they both found a window to climb through. Lucas had just run to the phone as the front door opened. They froze as the idea of 'oh god it's Billy' ran through their heads. The idea was completely ridiculous though as Steve walked through instead.

"What the hell?! Did you break into my house?" cried Steve.

"Yep, you should lock your windows more often," Lucas replied. "Also, we need your car."

Steve's eyes fell on Max and they went wide. "Oh no. No, no, and no! You are not driving—"

"Not me you idiot. We need you to drive us," grumbled Max. "I don't really have the way memorized anyways."

“Drive you-hold on. What happened to your face?”

“Nothing.”

“Billy did it.”

“What?!”

“Lucas!”

“He should know. Besides, maybe he can tell us some weird shit that’s been happening since he’s around the guy more.”

“You’ve got a point,” sighed Max.

“Alright first, watch the language. Secondly, what do you mean Billy did that. And thirdly, what weird shit are you talking about?!”

“Language,” Lucas and Max sarcastically mumbled.

“I’m serious. What is going on?!”

“Take us to Eleven and we’ll tell you on the way,” Max replied.

Steve stilled. His hands curled into fists as he carefully swallowed.  
“Are you sure?”

It was obvious what he meant and Lucas said, “No. I personally think Billy’s just lost it but Max thinks it’s something else.”

“It is something else,” she stressed. “Please Steve. Eleven’s the only one I know who could possibly get us answers.”

“Christ, and it hasn’t even been a year since the last bag of crazy dropped in our laps,” groaned Steve. He covered his face with his hands for a moment longer before letting out a disgruntled sigh and gestured forward. “Come on, we better hurry.”

Max and Lucas followed Steve outside, Lucas going to grab his bike so he could put it in Steve’s trunk before he left.

“So,” sighed Steve as he started the car and pulled out of his driveway. “What does this have to do with your step-brother? I

thought he agreed to back off after you drugged him and nearly crushed his balls with my bat.”

“First you,” Max interrupted. “Notice anything weird about him?”

“He’s been getting more riled up lately I think but—”

“What about anything else?” asked Max.

“I don’t know! He’s been missing out on basketball and classes I think but just because we’re both in high school doesn’t mean I see him anymore than you,” Steve replied. “But why do you care? Why’d he punch you?”

“I don’t know,” Max said just as Lucas replied, “He’s psychotic. He beat his dad’s face to a bloody pulp.”

“It looked worse than yours did,” Max admitted.

“Are you serious? Too bad you didn’t have any needles with you.”

Max rolled her eyes at the idea. They would have been helpful but she didn’t really think she could have made it across the room and got to him in time.

“But you think this is something else. Right?” asked Steve.

“We would have just called the chief if it was,” Max said. “Something’s...been wrong for a while but it’s too weird now to have any normal reasons for it.”

“And if anyone can say that for sure, it’s El,” Lucas said. “Personally, I think she’ll look at us like we’re crazy and then we’re going to get Hopper to put the psycho in jail but that’s just my bet.”

Max just shook her head again, not believing that for a second as Steve drove on, eventually getting out to the middle of nothing where the cabin was.

Thankfully Steve had learned the special knock in case of emergencies if Hopper wasn’t there and he did it now. Once the door clicked open, Steve quickly moved in with Lucas and Max right

behind.

“El, it’s Steve. We need your help.”

Looking up from the TV program she was watching, a deep frown set into Eleven’s face. “Something is wrong.” She looked back to Lucas and Max. “Something is very wrong.”

“Possibly,” Max said.

“Probably not,” Lucas added. “But on the off chance it is...”

“Listen. We just don’t have any way to contact Dr. Owens and with Hawkins Lab gone, you’re our best bet to find out if anything supernatural is happening here,” Steve quickly said.

Eleven gave them all a questioning look as if to ask what she could do.

“That middle ground place everyone talked about,” Max tried.

“The dark place,” Lucas quickly said. “Maybe you could try and find Billy and feel if he’s...normal or not.”

“Would that work? El’s never met Billy before now,” Steve said.

“I will know,” Eleven replied. “And this is no prank?”

“No El, we’re as serious as can be,” sighed Steve.

“So you’ll do it?” asked Max.

Eleven nodded and walked over to where a bandana was. Max had heard about this, been filled in on a lot of the strange details that revolved around Eleven and the Upside Down and Hawkins Lab. However, like most things in this town, she’d never actually seen it until now.

Max tightened her fists and sat down near to El. There was a weird sense of hoping she was right and Lucas was wrong, and also desperately hoping that her own ideas weren’t true in the slightest.

---

Eleven opened her eyes to darkness. Months had passed since there'd been any reason to come here and though she'd readily agreed, she certainly hadn't wanted to. Nevertheless, she'd been able to tell how worried the three of them were. After all, friends didn't lie and Eleven had no reason to believe that they would.

She knew what Billy looked like for the most part and carefully moved about, searching in the darkness for him.

For a while there was nothing. Even when she'd searched for Will in the Upside Down, it hadn't taken this long. Was something wrong with her? Or did this have to do with what Max and Lucas and Steve were afraid of?

Eleven moved on. She searched and searched and—

There. She was looking at his backside as he continually walked away from her. It wasn't hard for Eleven to catch up though. He felt like any person she'd been forced to find and she didn't understand what had everyone worried. She reached out towards him, expecting something to change, something weird. There was nothing though that seemed to explain why Max and the others had been so worried.

Her hand met with the jacket and Billy should have disappeared just like smoke. That's what happened every time she came into contact with something in this place.

Her hands pressed into the denim.

Billy whipped around and shoved her back as her eyes went wide. Eleven hit the black water and stared up at the teenager.

"I touched you," gasped out Eleven.

"Yeah you fucking touched me! Where am I?!"

Eleven just stared, her breath coming in fast and erratic.

"I asked where the fuck am I!" Billy yelled out.

*Nothing can hurt you in there.*



Papa had told her that the second time she'd gone in. She hadn't believed it then and after just physically touching someone, she didn't believe it now.

"Tell me!"

Billy launched himself forward and Eleven jerked back, throwing off the bandana and wiping at her nose.

"El, you alright?" asked Lucas.

She looked around and saw that everyone was eagerly awaiting her response. Eleven slowly put the bandana onto the floor and took several deep breaths. She'd felt him. He'd been right there.

"I felt him."

Max's eyes lit up and she leaned in close. "So you found him?"

"And let me guess," sighed Lucas, "you felt an overwhelming wave of douche-baggery coming from him and nothing else unusual?"

"I touched him," Eleven muttered.

"Yeah, we get that. You found him," sighed Lucas. "So anyways, now we can find Hopper and—"

"No Lucas."

"Uh, sorry?"

"I found him. I touched him," Eleven repeated with a pointed look.

Max shrugged. "So? I just want to know if he's normal or not."

Eleven let out a tired grumble. Max didn't understand it and Steve seemed to be in the same mindset. She looked to Lucas again and she let out a thankful sigh as she could see he was slowly beginning to understand.

"You couldn't have touched him though," Lucas muttered.

"Wait, what do you mean?" asked Steve. "She just said she found

him.”

“Yeah but she also said she touched him!” yelled Lucas. “The in between place isn’t like that. It’s...it’s like watching TV. You can see stuff that’s happening in another country but you can’t touch it or do anything about it. Good analogy El?”

“Analogy?”

“Sort of like comparing two similar things. Giving an example. Yeah?”

Eleven nodded. She supposed that for people that never could go to that place, that...analogy made sense.

“What about the other people you’ve found in there? What happens when you go near them?” asked Max.

“They disappear. Smoke,” Eleven said.

“Wait, and you’re saying Billy didn’t?”

“I touched him,” El repeated again with an annoyed sound and a glare.

“I told you something was off,” Max said as she elbowed Lucas in the side.

“Hey! I’m right too! If he’s stuck in the middle then this has nothing to do with the Upside Down,” replied Lucas with a smug look.

Steve let out a groan and rubbed his eyes. “Let’s argue over who’s right at a later date guys. Right now what matters is that if Billy is trapped there, then a) how did he get there, and b) what’s been walking around town looking like him?”

“Right...” sighed Lucas. “Can you find him again? See if you can get any answers?”

“He was mean,” Eleven muttered darkly.

“Leave it to Billy to be a prick even when he’s trapped on another

plane of existence,” grumbled Steve and Max nodded in agreement.

“But you can find him again?” asked Lucas.

“Yes but it will take time,” Eleven replied as she wiped away the last bit of blood. It was odd. She’d gotten better at going to the dark place and it usually didn’t take much out of her. Maybe it was because this Billy was physically there. Either way she’d need a few hours before she could try again at the very least.

“We should get Hopper here. Tell him what’s going on,” said Steve.

Eleven gave a quick nod and she turned to look at the radio. She spelled out the letters for ‘code red’ just as Max said, “We’ve got to tell the others.”

“We can’t do that to Will. Especially if he doesn’t have to get involved,” said Lucas.

“Same goes for Joyce and Jonathan,” sighed Steve. “The Byers have been through enough.”

“What about Dustin and Mike?” asked Max, Eleven’s head perking up at Mike’s name.

“We wait until Hopper gets here and then we’ll figure out who needs to be told and who doesn’t,” said Steve. “With any luck, this’ll only take a few days at the most.”

Lucas crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “When are we ever that lucky?”

“Gotta stay positive kid. Ok? Positive.”

The radio went off again and Eleven turned to look at them. “Hopper will be here soon.”

---

Almost six normal months and now this. At the very least the Mind Flayer had waited a year after the hell that had come with the Demogorgon. But now this? With the Upside Down closed-and god Jim didn’t know what he would do if it wasn’t-what little knowledge

they'd had of the place was now useless. From what he could understand, the place that El could go to was like a void. Nothing should have been there.

But if Billy was stuck there and something else was walking around in his skin, that left two options, neither of which Jim liked. Either the void wasn't as void as they thought, or there were more dimensions other than the Upside Down.

He'd been terrified upon hearing 'code red' come through the radio but it had been difficult coming up with a good excuse to get away. It also didn't help his temper that the moment he arrived Steve asked, "Where have you been?"

"Doing my job," growled Jim, his worry only falling slightly upon seeing they were alright; Steve, Lucas, El, and— "You, Max, where the hell is your brother?"

"Step-brother."

"I really don't care about the particulars," growled Jim. "I've just come from the hospital where Neil Hargrove's been beaten completely to shit."

"Hey, language in front of the—"

"Steve."

"Right, sorry."

"Now I've got Hargrove telling me his son did that to him. Max, do you have any idea where he is?"

"That's actually why we called you," said Lucas.

"You were there-god did he do that? Max are you alright?" asked Jim, his eyes zeroing in on the bruise. He didn't know what the hell was going on but any irritation over the situation went out the window upon seeing the kid hurt.

"He didn't. Did. Sort of," muttered Max, clearly not completely comfortable with the attention Jim was giving her. "It's kind of

complicated.”

“It wasn’t him. Or at least not mostly,” said Lucas. “I wouldn’t be surprised if there was at least a little bit of the douche left in there.”

“He’s trapped in the in between place,” Steve sighed as he skipped straight to the point. “We had El check.”

That was where Jim started coming up with the possibilities of what that could actually mean just as he muttered, “Is that even possible?”

“It happened,” Eleven said.

Jim slowly rubbed his eyes. After the scare a few months ago about some government goons moving into the area, Jim had hoped everything else would be smooth sailing until Eleven could come out into the world. Why couldn’t any of this be easy?

“Alright, just...tell me everything.” Jim waited for their answers, listened to what Max and Lucas had seen, Max’s account of the past weeks, and then El’s explanation of the dark place. And then... “That’s it? Are you...urgh!-kidding me right now?”

“El said she’ll go back in, see if she can find anymore answers,” Lucas added. “We just got to wait.”

“But while we wait, you’re telling me there’s some unknown thing walking around looking like Billy Hargrove?” asked Jim.

“Yes!” cried Steve. “Why do you keep questioning that?”

“Because after getting some of his records that were faxed to me, I can see Billy Hargrove beating the hell out of his dad. What I can’t see is some thing from the void or another place coming to nice and cozy Earth and thinking, “oh, I know the first thing I want to do. Beat the shit out of my host’s dad”,” growled Jim, sarcasm dripping from his lips. “Not kill him, suck his blood, or vaporize him, just beating the shit out of him.”

“Wait, fax you the records? What records?” asked Max.

Steve uneasily gulped. “Oh god. Don’t tell me he’s killed someone or

something.”

“What? No! Just a robbery three years ago and a few fights here and there,” sighed Jim.

“Well then what caught your eye?” Max asked. “You just said after reading his records, you could—”

“I know what I said Max and now that I’m thinking about it, I probably shouldn’t have,” sighed Jim.

“I don’t care. Tell me.”

“Max, it’s not my place and I probably shouldn’t have brought it up anyways so just leave it. Now do you have any idea where Billy could be? He left his car this time and just vanished from what I could figure out,” said Jim.

Max crossed her arms, clearly sulking as she stomped over to a chair and fell into it. Jim looked over to Steve as the teen came forward and asked, “Why does it matter if we know of places Billy likes to go? We’ve just established it’s not really him.”

“Yeah but if there is any Billy left in him like Lucas said, then maybe there’s a chance he’ll still feel a reason to go to any of those areas,” said Jim. “It’s the only lead we’ve got so I repeat, where would he likely go if he needed to get away from home.”

“I don’t know,” sighed Max. “Any bars around here with crap IDing? I’m guessing there aren’t any piers.”

Jim snorted. “No, why?”

“Sometimes he’d go walking on the more secluded or empty ones in California,” said Max. “Just to be away from it all.”

“Maybe a hiking trail then? The train tracks? Somewhere in the woods?” questioned Steve.

“It’s a thought,” sighed Jim.

“Are you going to send the police after him?” asked Lucas. “What if

he goes berserk?”

“And who else would I send? You lot?” snorted Jim.

Lucas smirked. “Well we did take out some of those demodogs so—”

“Excuse you, I did. And Hopper’s right,” interrupted Steve. “Better to have the cops bring him in and then Hopper can do some cover up about him escaping or whatever so we can get our hands on him.”

“Huh, that’s not a half bad idea,” Lucas said.

“It’s not. Shouldn’t be too hard to do it either,” sighed Jim. “But, until we do find Billy and until El can get more information, I want you three to go back out there and act like everything is fine and dandy, understood? It’s hard enough dealing with one missing kid. I don’t need three others on that plate.”

“And we don’t tell the others?” asked Lucas.

“No, not yet. Don’t tell anyone. Just keep an eye out for Billy and call 911 the moment you see him,” said Jim. “Now come on. It’s late enough and—”

“I don’t want to,” Max stubbornly said. “Mom’s going to be at the hospital and all over Neil. I don’t want to see that.”

“You can’t just stay here,” sighed Jim. “You’re thankfully not considered missing but your mom is worried sick. She’s been putting the word out, hoping you’ll know to come to the hospital instead of home after hanging out with your friends.”

“Please...”

“Max I—”

“Come on chief,” said Lucas. “You can go over and probably convince her mom that she’s fine. Say that she’s staying at a friend’s house or something, and that she’ll be back in the morning. Can’t you do that?”

“Yes, exactly! Please!” Max quickly said.

"Come on Chief. Just let her have a break tonight," sighed Steve.

"I think it's fine," Eleven suddenly said before Jim could argue more. "She can stay."

"See," Max smirked. "It's fine."

"El, that is not your call to make," groaned Jim. Nevertheless, he looked at Max and thought about what it must be like having to see her step-brother do that to Neil and then running with Lucas for fear that Billy would go after them. God, these kids were going to get him killed one day. "If you stay, you have to follow the rules just like El. And it's only for a night," stressed Jim.

"Deal," Max replied.

"In that case, Steve I trust you to get Lucas here home. And remember, just because you're a few years older than these twerps does not mean you can go off and try to find Billy on your own. Leave it to the cops."

"You got it chief," Steve nodded. "Come on Lucas. Your mom is probably worried sick."

"I'll see you at school tomorrow Max," Lucas said with a small wave.

She waved back as Steve said the same thing and they both left, leaving Jim to stare pointedly at the two girls. "I'll try to be back soon. Now stay put and don't open the door unless you hear me. Got it?"

El nodded as Max rolled her eyes and went, "Fine."

"And if I'm not back in time, make sure you eat a proper meal before you get out those Eggos."

"I remember," El replied, a small smile finally appearing on her lips.

"Good. I'll see you both later. And be a good guest and make up a bed for Max," said Jim. He nodded once more, rubbed his eyes and headed on out. He waited just a second, hearing the familiar clicks of the locks before he went over to his truck and got in.



He tried to remind himself that at the very least it didn't look like the Mind Flayer or the Upside Down was involved. He wasn't sure that they could survive another encounter with that so soon after the last time. Still, it made him uneasy that something else was out there and he couldn't help but move his mind back to those rumors about more government goons coming in. He'd checked out all that he could, even asked Dr. Owens about it, but nothing had come up. What if...

No, now he was just being paranoid, making wild connections that weren't there. But in some ways, that just made this all the more nerve wracking. The thing that had grounded him about the first and second time weird shit went down was that asshole people were involved and he knew how to deal with that. Just an unknown creature that didn't have any rhyme or reason to be here, at least not any that Jim knew of, that was a lot harder to deal with.

And then the theory Max had of it using up Billy's anger like a well? Damn, from what he'd heard it couldn't have picked a better target.

They'd just have to find the kid as quickly as possible and hopefully once he was in custody, they'd be able to figure out what the hell was going on.

Jim drove back to town and went straight to the hospital to reassure Mrs. Hargrove about the whole situation. He went over to the ICU where she was waiting outside Mr. Hargrove's hospital room.

"Have you found them? Have you—"

"Your daughter is fine."

"You've talked to her?"

"Yes. I...somewhat explained the situation. Don't worry ma'am I was delicate. But she wanted to spend the night at a friend's house rather than here. She promised to be back home tomorrow after school and I'll make sure she is."

"Oh...oh thank god. And Billy?"

"No word yet but we'll keep you updated. I promise you that," said Jim.

"Thank you. I just...I know he had a temper but...but I just never thought...I'm sorry." Tears welled up in her eyes and Jim wondered who they were for, her husband, daughter, step-son, or herself.

He just sighed in response though and tried to be as calming as possible to help stop the soft weeping. "No, no need for that. We'll find him and we'll figure out what happened."

"I know what happened."

The voice didn't come from Jim or Max's mom. He took a step over and looked into the hospital room. He'd been there at the scene and yet somehow Neil looked worse all bandaged up and in the hospital.

"I believe I had an officer take your statement," said Jim, "but if you think you left something out on your side I can—"

"I didn't leave nothing out and don't talk to me like this is a situation where everyone has a fair view of what happened," spit out Neil. He took a few wheezing breaths and muttered. "I hope you do find him though. Find him so I can kill that bastard."

"Hmm." Jim wasn't quite sure what to say to that so after an awkward pause, he simply said, "Well, if you need to revise your statement, the office is just a phone call away. Mr. and Mrs. Hargrove."

Jim turned away before he heard anything else out of Neil. Now that he knew Billy wasn't Billy, he'd have to figure out a way to protect the kid once they got him back considering the fact that Neil Hargrove was practically aching for blood. He'd heard plenty of bad things about the kid from Max and the others and had even pulled him over for speeding once. However, prick or not Jim wasn't going to let the kid go through hell again. What he'd seen in that file, no one deserved that and as he drove back to the station to pick up some reports to read over for the night, Jim started to formulate a plan for that.

Of course, all that thinking would only matter if they even managed to get the kid back in the first place.

## 2. The Tracks

### Notes for the Chapter:

And another chapter is up! This definitely went in an unexpected direction but I think I'm pretty happy with the way this is going. Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy :)

Billy gripped the steering wheel so hard that his hands were beginning to hurt as he sped through the streets. After his 'talk' with his father, he'd tried to get Max to come with him but she still was prancing off with that Sinclair kid and those other brats. He'd warned her. He'd tried to fucking keep her from seeing that kid but did she listen? No! No one ever fucking listened!

Without a second thought, Billy veered down a county road, not bothering to use his turn signal.

He didn't care about Max! He'd just taken his father's twisted words and tried to do what he was always on his ass about: look after her, take care of her. Well apparently she didn't care what kind of trouble happened with Sinclair and she clearly didn't care about his opinion so fuck her and fuck this place.

God he wished he could leave now. He'd tried that at age fifteen and...well he still didn't understand why his old man had been so big on looking for him. He never cared anyway. But apparently out of everything in Billy's life, this was the one time he'd decided that something mattered and god had he been angry about it.

So despite how much Billy just wanted to leave now, it was better to wait it out. Wait until his dad didn't have any hold on him and couldn't force him to come back home.

He veered onto a dirt road next, went into the woods, and made sure to slam his door as hard as he could once he stopped. He pulled out a cigarette as he started to move through the dead trees. Not trying to put on a show, not trying to fix himself or watch after Max or do what his dad asked or staying in that fucked up house.

It was just him. The only time Billy felt he could breathe easily without something crawling down his neck. He still hadn't found a good path to go and he honestly didn't want to go down a real hiking trail since these hick freaks probably actually liked hiking and did it all the time.

He needed something more secluded and far away.

Billy kept walking until he finished one cigarette and then started another. He paused to look around himself and grimaced. He'd never been a huge fan of the woods. They were pretty creepy in his mind. A lot of shit could be hiding in them, not unlike the ocean but...maybe he was just biased growing up in California and all. Still, this area was all he got for a break from the hell that was his life and he quickly continued on. He had a few more hours to kill before he needed to be home anyways.

For a while, there was just silence and Billy looked at what seemed to be the same group of trees he'd passed through for the last hour. However, something in the distance eventually caught his eye. It was something different than all these dead trees and melting snow.

"Huh."

Billy walked over and eventually hit train tracks. The trees were perfectly bowed around them, likely giving the trains enough room to go through while also allowing the trees to still grow. He looked in both directions. It wasn't possible. There had to be a turn somewhere, a place where the tracks finally stopped. But from where he was standing, it looked like this went on forever in both directions. Despite his dislike of the woods, it did bring some comfort, the idea that he could start walking and never stop and never return.

His feet slowly moved from one old beam to the next one before he stopped to snub his cigarette out on the rails.

Straightening his back, he looked to the darkening sky and decided it was time he go home if he didn't want another 'talk' with dad.

Billy turned around, a sigh escaping his lips as a breeze upset his hair and whistled through the dead trees. His boot moved off the dead

plank and towards the one behind as he twisted around and—

Darkness.

He froze, rubbed at his eyes and wondered ‘did I really just go blind?’ He opened them, the world still black except...his hands. He could still see those just fine. He looked down at his chest, ran a hand down to a leg. He could see himself. He was there and alive and...standing in black water? That’s what it seemed. And around him...more dark. More blackness just going on and on forever.

“What the fuck...” He had to have lost time. That was the only explanation he could think of. Someone might have come up behind him, hit him hard enough that he didn’t even remember that, and then dragged him to this place. He had no idea why someone would want to kidnap him but it was the only logical explanation he could think of.

“Where am I?!” Billy yelled out. He turned round and round before deciding he should start finding the parameters of the place.

Billy didn’t think about the fact that despite only darkness surrounding him, there was somehow light that allowed him to see his own hands and clothes. He also didn’t think about how long he was walking for, how impossibly big this room seemed to be or why there was water on the ground. He just kept moving because it was the only thing he could think of to do. One foot in front of the other, now that was familiar. Billy could work with that even if he had to ignore the unanswerable questions that his mind was trying to bring towards the forefront.

There was no way to tell how long he’d been there, nothing to keep time. He figured it couldn’t be long. He wasn’t hungry, didn’t need a shit and wasn’t itching for a cigarette already. The fact that it just felt like ages was just because he was getting bored. That had to be it. The place was just playing tricks with his mind.

He moved forward and—

The living room.

His dad.

“I just needed a break—”

He went down. His father yelled at him. Yelled and hit like he always did.

“Is that understood?”

“Yes...sir.”

His father leaned in, his breath brushing against his cheek. “You’re on a short rope son. Any more mistakes like this and I’ll kill you.”

Billy just nodded. In the back of his head, something was telling him this didn’t make since. Hadn’t he just been in some dark room? But it slipped away like an old memory. What mattered was the danger in front of him. He wanted to lash out but couldn’t. No, if he lashed out then his father would hit him back twice as hard. He just nodded again in understanding and quickly walked back towards his room.

Why wasn’t he strong enough? He could fight anyone with ease, had beat Harrington to a pulp, could do that to just about everyone at school. So why couldn’t he stand up to his dad?

He could feel the tears pricking at the corners of his eyes while he thought about just throwing his fucking desk through his window. He wanted to break everything within reach. He wanted to fall to the ground and never get up again. He pushed past Max and—

The water rippled outwards into nothing. Billy whipped around again. Rubbed at his eyes as he tried to understand what was going on and he recalled that he’d been here just moments ago.

He...before his father...he’d been in the woods for days. Eventually went to his car and drove to a gas station. Hunger, there had been so much hunger and then he’d...gone to pick up Max like he always did? Like he was supposed to. And after that? What after...his father. He’d been angry because he’d been gone for a week, maybe more?

But all these thoughts didn’t feel like memories. They felt false and like they were belonging to someone else. Yet he’d slipped back in,

doing what he always did around his father, cowering and hoping he'd just fucking stop.

And then he was back here.

Billy grabbed at his hair and hoped the pain would do something. It didn't matter how hard he pulled or the yell that escaped his throat. When he opened his eyes, he was still in the blackness. His screams didn't echo and as his head whipped around, he saw that everything was the same. An endless void.

Was he going crazy? Had he finally lost it for good? If so, why was he able to follow this so logically? This didn't feel like any weird psychology shit or what it was like to be in a coma going by what he'd read. And...and he couldn't be positive but he was pretty sure he was still out there. Still moving around and interacting but the memories of that time weren't his own.

He shook his head again. No! He had to do something. He'd figure this out later. For now he needed to keep going. No point in staying still. He had to keep fighting.

Billy pushed forward, kept walking as his eyes widely looked left and right. Just blackness. Nothing...

"Get in you little shit before you make me late," Billy said. God, why did Max have to be such a god damn nuisance? It was because of her and her mom that everything had gone from bad to worse, forced them to move away from California and now he had to look after her too, getting punished whenever he failed. God, it wasn't fucking fair.

He looked over and noticed Max staring with wide eyes. He glanced at himself in the rearview mirror but there was nothing on his face or in his teeth. "Stop being such a goddamn creep," growled Billy, "and stare at something else why don't ya?"

He drove Max to school, glaring out the window when a tree suddenly flashed by to reveal nothing. He looked down and realized he was just standing there in the black, reflective-less water, no longer driving.

Billy took a step out of the water and his boot hit tile on the way down. Up again and then it went into the water. In the darkness, nothing changed. Not his clothes, not his hair or hunger. He just was. And in the other world everything changed. Everything from his clothes to his facial hair to the seasons and classes. And what few memories he got when he passed over seemed more and more distant as he went along. He started to remember less particulars and only the emotions. Hunger and inquisitiveness. And anger...it seemed every time he went back he was just so angry, his memory going red as he tried to identify anything specific.

Whenever he fell back to the darkness, the anger turned to panic as he no longer could fight the unanswerable questions that bubbled up in his head. He had no idea how much time was passing or where he was. Those parameters he'd been searching for he'd long forgotten. He just kept moving because if he stopped, he was afraid he'd go crazy.

Billy was out of his depth. He knew that now. All rational explanations had long disappeared from his head and he was so god damn desperate.

The flashes of the real world were few and far between now. He was disappearing from it, trapped only in darkness. With no one to play the big man to, no one to put on a persona for, he could admit he was terrified. The fear was just growing as he pushed through the emptiness.

Even when he spent longer in the real world, he could no longer remember it. He'd get a flash of something. A familiar ceiling or a floor and it felt like so much happened in that single moment but then he was gone. Stuck in the darkness once more.

He just had to keep going and going—

Touch. Someone touched him. For a split second there was comfort. He wasn't alone. And then the fear of that sentence hit him full force and he shoved the form away, eyes going wide as he looked at the curly haired girl.

"I touched you."



“Yeah you fucking touched me! Where am I?!” yelled Billy. He needed answers and he needed them now. “I asked where the fuck am I!”

He launched himself forward and fell into the cold water. He stumbled, pushed himself up and wildly swung his head around. Where was she? Where had she gone?!

“Come back!” Billy screamed. “Come back I...I’m sorry. I’m sorry just...please...please...come—”

There was nothing to hit. Nothing to take his emotions out on so he just started to cry. Had the girl even been real? Maybe being trapped in here wasn’t a sign of being crazy but the appearance of that girl had to be. He couldn’t do this anymore. There was nothing he could punch, nothing he could push against. All that walking and he’d never felt tired. Why? Because he’d never gotten anywhere. Nothing had changed. Nothing would change!

He collapsed in the water that wasn’t even high enough to drown himself in and sobbed, the only noise in the dark hell.

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“I can do it now,” Eleven said as she looked at Max. She’d made her a bed, brought out a board game for them to play, and had just finished dinner. Eleven had a waffle in her hand as they both sat on the couch.

“Will you be able to do it longer tomorrow? Like, will you be stronger if you wait?”

Eleven nodded.

“Do it tomorrow then,” Max said with a shrug. “No need to worry. I’m sure he’s fine. Billy can wait a day longer. So do you like any movies or shows? I’m guessing you like something since you’ve got a TV.”

Eleven nodded again.

“Well, I want to know what you like to watch. You should pick something,” grinned Max.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t watch much TV and I’m curious what you watch.”

“Why that?” asked Eleven. “Why want to know what I watch?”

“It’s what friends do I guess. Besides, I picked the board game. Your turn to pick something you enjoy.”

Eleven thought about it for a second and then nodded, switching the TV on without getting up. She watched Max a little and noticed how she laughed out loud at the amusing parts. Eleven tried a few times, a little chuckle here and there.

“You don’t have to laugh every time I do,” Max said. “Just the parts you think are funny. Got it?”

Eleven nodded again and she eased back on the laughing a bit. Tried to make it more...natural.

Hanging out with Max was different than the time she spent with Mike or the others. She understood that Max had been heavily involved with the reopening of the Upside Down and the appearance of the Mind Flayer but they’d still interacted very little.

It was difficult changing her mindset on who Max was but when she’d first seen her, Eleven now understood she hadn’t known her or her intentions. Now that she knew her a bit better, there was no point in getting angry with her and she did find her company nice. It was different from Hopper but still nice. Calming almost.

It was time for bed and Hopper had just sent a message saying that they’d better be asleep by the time he got there. As they both got ready, Eleven letting Max borrow some clothes, Max said, “You ever been interested in skateboarding?”

Eleven shrugged.

“I could teach you some time if you’d like.”

She cocked her head to the side, silently asking why.

“Don’t have anyone I can skateboard with. Besides, then you wouldn’t have to always hop on one of the other kid’s bikes all the time,” Max replied. “Sound good?”

“Sounds...good.”

Max smiled again before pulling her blanket over her.

Eleven mimicked the action as she switched the lights off. As she closed her eyes, her mind thought of what was happening. Guilt rose up in her as she thought about how she’d been the one to open the gate in the first place. Everything that had happened to her friends, to Will and his family, it was because of her. Was this because of her too?

The possibility was there and Eleven wondered if anyone else would be effected because of her own mistakes. The tears fell from her eyes despite how she tried to keep it back and she fell asleep soon after.

Her eyes drifted closed and then...felt it. It hadn’t originated in the dark place. No...no it was just passing through. Passing through and...surviving. There was no malice in this. They were nothing like the men at Hawkins Lab. She didn’t even feel anger towards them. No...just trying to survive. Just a simple thought. Spreading...growing...taking from their own world—

“Rise and shine kiddos! I have to take you to school and then you better go straight to the hospital afterwards. Your mother needs you right now,” Hopper said, his voice breaking through Eleven’s dream.

She woke with a start and watched with wide eyes as Hopper headed back into the small kitchen area and Max sat up with an over exaggerated yawn.

Eleven looked around, half expecting for everything to suddenly look different. But those things...she’d felt how they moved, their passing, their need to live. She looked to Hopper and then to Max but neither gave her any answers or any hint that they could feel the change as well.

Eleven went to the restroom and looked at herself in the mirror,

searching for anything unusual. She hadn't been looking forward to meeting Max's family again. He'd been rude and had scared her but now she desperately wanted Hopper and Max out so she could do just that. She needed answers. They all did.

As they sat down to eat a quick breakfast, Hopper asked, "So are you going to search for Billy today? Need me to stay behind?"

Eleven shook her head.

"Alright, just know I'm here if you need me," he replied as he finished up his cup of coffee. "Come on Max. School time."

"Do I really need to go now? We have three days left and we're not doing anything."

"You still need to go," sighed Hopper. "No buts about it. Now go on and get in the car."

Max rolled her eyes but gave a final wave to Eleven all the same. "It was cool hanging out. I'll see you later El."

Eleven nodded and watched the two leave, shooting one last smile at Hopper that she thought might reassure him. However, it slowly fell from her lips as her eyes turned to the bandana. At least this time she was prepared. She had an idea of what to expect now, both from the dark place and from Max's family.

She sat back down on the couch, the TV turning to white noise as she pulled the bandana over her eyes. She took in a deep breath and—

Now where was he?

She looked around the dark place. She took several steps, reaching out and trying to feel him again. It took longer than normal but was also quicker than last time now that she knew what to feel for.

What she found shocked her. She paused, a frown setting into her face as she listened to the sudden sound of sobbing, saw the shivering form. Eleven walked over and as he didn't react, she knelt down and touched his shoulder.

He flinched, cried out, and in a flash was on his feet and moving backwards. This time Eleven didn't panic so much and simply took another step forward. She pointed at him. "Billy."

For a moment he just stared at her. Very slowly, he walked forward, hands out stretched. "Don't...please don't..." He whispered it just as one of his hands touched her shoulder.

Eleven made a face at the contact but Billy's lit up. He put his hands on both her shoulders and then on the side of her face.

"I'm not crazy. You-you're here-right here—"

"Stop touching me."

Billy drew back sharply. "You're real. Aren't you?"

Eleven nodded as she looked him up and down.

"Do you know where we are?"

"The dark place."

"What the hell is that?"

Eleven frowned. Despite how he'd been crying just moments ago, she could tell he was already starting to get riled up again. He was getting desperate.

"You are stuck here. How?" asked Eleven.

"H-how? You're asking me? I don't fucking know! How are you here? Huh? How about you tell me that?!"

"I can travel here. Nothing can live here."

"Oh yeah? Then what about me?!"

"I don't know." Eleven thought about Lucas and how he'd been so unwilling to believe when they'd first met. She imagined it was difficult for Billy to accept all this but she could only be blunt with him and she wasn't much better at other approaches anyway.

“Something is walking around in your body.”

He looked like he was ready to argue the fact but he paused. Something on his face told Eleven that he wasn't completely ignoring her idea but he muttered, “Oh yeah? And what's it doing?”

“Acting odd. Distant. Then angry.” Here Eleven's face darkened just a bit. “You hit Max. Twice.”

Billy frowned. He looked like he was trying to gather up his memories, some part of him not believing her even as another part did.

“You hit your dad. He's in the hospital.”

Eleven continued to watch him and noted the way he went white. His hands started to shake and he quickly shoved them in his pockets.

“I wouldn't have,” Billy muttered, suddenly avoiding her eyes.

“You didn't. It did,” Eleven responded. “Do you remember?”

“No I...I wouldn't have...there are these flashes here and there but not—”

“The last memory?”

“I was walking on the train tracks and...and then I ended up here. I think. But I went back...back and forth...I just don't fucking know!”

The feeling of fear and confusion vanished and back was the anger and desperation.

“Who the hell even are you!? Why won't you give me a straight answer?!”

“Eleven,” she said, pointing to herself. She ignored the second part. “I have to go.”

And then the fear was back again. Eleven wondered if it was because of the situation or if Billy was always this unpredictable.

"Please," he suddenly said, one hand reaching out before he quickly clenched it and let his arm fall to the side. "I don't want to be alone. Not again."

"I can't stay long. I will be back. Max and friends are looking."

"Wait...you mean Max knows where I am?"

Eleven nodded. "She will help. I will help. But I can't stay longer."

"But you'll come back."

Eleven nodded again and pulled off the bandana before Billy could say more. She'd learned a lot and yet nothing at all in the same instance. She thought back to her dream and wondered how it all connected together. She wondered about Billy, what time had to be like for him in that place, and also if there was anything else he could remember.

For the moment though, all Eleven could do was wonder as she wiped away the blood and thought of what she would tell Hopper.

---

"The Chief said I have to go see my mom but I'm sure as hell not spending all day there," sighed Max. "I'll meet you guys at the arcade."

"Hey, I can come with you," Lucas quickly piped up. "It'll make the journey back less boring."

Dustin made that stupid purring sound that he was so proud of and him alone. He did a sing-song voice and said, "Alone time with Max —"

"Shut it Dustin. I'm just trying to be nice," grumbled Lucas as he looked away and blushed.

Max rolled her eyes, not really caring as Dustin teased a bit more before she said, "If you're coming hurry up stalker. No point in dragging this out longer than necessary."

She dropped her skateboard on the ground and quickly went off with

Lucas catching up with her not long after. There was a lot of downhill areas so she stayed on her skateboard as Lucas kept in time with her. They talked about their plans for the summer, the excitement only somewhat lessened by the fact Dustin's mother was dragging him off on a trip midway through. Still, they at least got him for the first part and latter and they'd all promised not to do anything too crazy without him.

They had two days left at school now and they'd all agreed to skip the last one because really, what could possibly be happening on the last day that made going worth it?

At the hospital, Lucas waited near the front door as Max picked up her skateboard and headed in. She found the room and winced at the sight inside. She hoped Neil didn't remember her and Lucas being there because that would be a bit hard to explain. His face was heavily bandaged and what she could see was still badly bruised.

"Maxine, oh thank god I was worried sick!"

"I'm fine mom," muttered Max but she let her mother fuss over her and only made a face once when she gave her a second kiss on the cheek. "Seriously, I'm alright. I have to go soon though. I promised everyone I'd meet them at the arcade."

"I'd really feel safer if you—"

"I'll be with my friends in the middle of a busy arcade. I'll be fine mom."

It took a bit more convincing but finally her mother said, "Can you just stay with Neil until I get back? I don't want him to wake up alone if he does."

"Fine," murmured Max.

She watched her mother leave and sat in a chair with a huff. Hopefully she wouldn't be long and she could run off before Neil woke up.

Max wrung her hands and looked everywhere except Neil's face. Even if it hadn't been Billy, just seeing what happened to Neil had been



pretty terrifying. Every time she heard someone walk by, Max jolted upwards, hoping it was her mom coming back in. She slowly had to sit back down every time though, her eyes constantly moving back to the clock in the room. How was this taking so long yet apparently only two minutes had passed?

She yelped at the sudden contact, her eyes moving back to Neil and the hand that had grabbed onto her wrist.

"I'm glad to know you're safe," Neil said with absolutely no warmth in his voice. "Have you seen Billy?"

"Uh...no. I haven't. Sorry. Sorry about...what happened," murmured Max.

"Don't be. You weren't involved," Neil growled out.

Max simply nodded as he finally let go of her arm the same moment her mother stepped in. "I'll see you tonight mom. Bye!" she said before her mother could stop her. She ran out of the room and back downstairs with a huff where Lucas was still waiting.

"Everything alright?"

"Yeah just...was kind of afraid if Neil remembered us being there."

"Yeah that wouldn't have looked good," snorted Lucas. "Speaking of Billy...I guess we should talk about it now before we get to the arcade. Right?"

"Still not much to say," Max replied as they started to head back. It was a pretty flat stretch so they got on their respective vehicles though eventually they'd have to walk up hill. "Eleven said she'd try again today actually. Since she waited longer, she'd be able to hold a longer conversation too."

"Hopefully that makes a difference and she gets something out of him," sighed Lucas. "Should we go find Hopper today? You know he'll try to keep us out of the loop if we don't."

"He's just trying to keep us safe," Max said.

"I know! But it doesn't mean I'm letting him lock me out of this. I want to know what this is and what's happening."

Max snorted. "Same here. Billy's not family but he's my blasted step-brother which means I can't not get involved."

"Fair enough," Lucas agreed. "Come on. Let's hurry back before the others start asking questions. I guess we can find Hopper afterwards."

"Or tomorrow. I doubt much will happen today," Max replied as they both quickened their pace.

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Steve was driving back home. Since graduation had happened last week, he'd spent the entire day driving around town and on the lookout for Billy. In some ways, it was a stupid idea. After the shit that happened with his dad, why the hell would he be out in the open? But then, he was thinking of this thing like it was actually Billy. Clearly it had to have accessed his head somehow to be able to mimic him for the past few months but now it was starting to do its own thing. Maybe it would follow some internal knowledge, knowing it was supposed to go to some specific place. Or maybe it was completely following its own path.

Either way, he didn't see Billy all day. Nevertheless, on the way home, he spotted some cop cars near the tracks and, once inside his house, hurried to the phone without giving his mom a second glance.

"Sheriff's office."

"Is Hopper in? It's Steve. Steve Harrington," he said, making sure to keep his voice low enough so his mother couldn't hear.

"No. He's out looking for that Hargrove kid. I think they're at the tracks today. But if this is an emergency—"

"It's fine. Sorry for bothering you," Steve replied. He hung up and immediately went back towards the front door just as—

"Steve, you're leaving just like that?" asked his mother. "You only just got home. You do remember we're leaving tomorrow morning for that cruise. We'd like to—"

“I’m sorry mom,” Steve interrupted, rushing over to give her a quick kiss to stay on her good side. “I’ve got plans but don’t worry. I’ll be back for dinner. Promise.”

He rushed out of the house, fully prepared to head over to the tracks despite what Hopper had made him promise. It was probably pretty rash of him but he needed a purpose right now and this had just fallen into his lap. He was officially a high school graduate and the fact was seriously worrisome. Despite breaking up with Nancy back in November, he still hadn’t figured out a different plan for his future. He could still go and work with his dad but that had been with the goal of just staying until Nancy’s senior year. Now...now he wasn’t sure if he wanted to do that at all but he wasn’t sure if he was ready to leave Hawkins either.

After the crazy things that had happened, he was sure other people would have ran in the opposite direction the moment they got the chance. For Steve though, there were a lot of things that made him want to stay. Part of that was still Nancy. He cared about her and though he knew she was with Jonathan and happier now, he wasn’t sure he could stand it if he just up and left her behind. Then there was of course the kids. It probably seemed weird but he was pretty sure he’d miss them more than his own mom and dad if he upped and left.

He’d just have to figure something else out but for the moment, at least looking for Billy gave him a goal.

Steve was thinking that anyways as he walked out and saw both Nancy and Jonathan right there.

“Uh...”

“Sorry for showing up unannounced,” Nancy said with a slight smile. “I was just...I wanted to make sure everything was ok.”

Steve quickly closed the door behind him and walked over. “Yeah, I’m fine. What’s up Nance?”

“Well you didn’t meet us for lunch,” Jonathan said with a raised eyebrow.

“And you didn’t come with us to go summer job hunting like you promised,” Nancy added.

“Shit, that was yesterday?”

Jonathan nodded as Nancy’s brow furrowed. “Yes,” she murmured, “what’s going on Steve?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing I just...I had some errands to run and I just...I forgot to tell you. That’s my bad. Sorry about that.”

“Well if you’re not busy now we could—”

“I am, actually,” Steve interrupted Nancy.

“With?” asked Jonathan.

Steve’s brain drew a complete blank. “Errands? More errands, that is.”

“You are such a bad liar,” muttered Jonathan.

“You’re seriously keeping us out?” asked Nancy.

“What? No! I’m not keeping you out of anything. I just really need—”

“Is it the Upside Down?” Nancy interrupted. She bit her lip, fear flashing through her eyes.

“It’s not that! Dear god no...” Steve sighed. If only he hadn’t run into them. Jonathan was right after all. He was absolute shit at telling a good lie. It was amazing his parents had never called him out on one. “It’s not the Upside Down. At least...we’re pretty sure it’s not.”

A broken look came over Jonathan’s face. “Will—”

“It’s not about him either. I was actually hoping this would all get solved before you guys even had to find out,” sighed Steve. “It’s about Billy actually.”

“Wait. That psycho that my mom found drugged up on her living room floor?”

Steve couldn't help but laugh at the memory. "The one and the same."

"Didn't he just beat up his dad? Like really bad?" asked Nancy. "They were talking about it at school. The police are after him, right?"

"Yeah but for all his faults, that wasn't him."

"You're seriously sticking up for that ass?" asked Jonathan.

"Of course I'm not! I'm just telling you the truth. Eleven found him in the dark place. And I don't mean like normal. He's physically there and something else is walking around in his body."

Jonathan and Nancy froze, looking at each other with wide eyes.

"You're serious," she murmured. "That's...horrifying. And Hopper knows too?"

Steve nodded. "And Max and Lucas. Max was the first one to realize something was wrong and they came and got me."

"So now what?" asked Nancy.

"I'm not sure but the police seem to be hanging around the tracks a lot today. Maybe Eleven told Hopper something about it."

"And you were going there now?" asked Jonathan.

"Yeah. I figured it was worth a shot."

"Alone."

Steve shrugged.

"Now," Jonathan slowly said, "correct me because I wasn't there, but I'm pretty sure that someone said he beat the shit out of you last time and it was Max that had to save you by plunging a needle into his neck. And you were planning to go alone despite this."

"I didn't want to get you guys involved if you didn't need to be. And I was going to bring my bat!" defended Steve.

"Oh, I wonder how that's going to look," muttered Nancy with a pout. "Whatever this thing is, did you ever think about the fact that it might look kind of bad if you beat another teen to death with a baseball bat full of nails? And what if it's actually Billy's body! What if you destroy any way that he can get back?!"

"I wouldn't miss him," Jonathan responded.

"I don't think anyone would," sighed Steve. "But yeah...alright you've got a point. Didn't really think about that. I guess I'll just—"

"We'll come with you then," said Nancy.

"No I can't—"

"You're not making me do anything Steve. Besides, I think it's a bad idea if you go alone," said Nancy.

"And you're going to still go, aren't you? Despite what we just said," Jonathan sighed. "Might as well watch your back. You've done it for us so we'll do it for you."

"You guys don't—"

"We're going," Nancy interrupted, grabbing his arm and dragging him towards the cars. "And we'll take Jonathan's."

"Well let me grab my bat still. Just in case."

The three piled into the car, Steve in the back with his trusty bat by his side. He mentioned where he'd seen the cop cars so they drove for a bit, getting away from most of the buildings and major roads to hopefully go to a section the cops hadn't gone over yet. Jonathan turned down a dirt road and then pulled off to the side. It was near to where Steve and Dustin had continued their trail of meat for Dart.

The three headed into the trees, the place green and flush with summer coming.

"So are we looking for him or whatever did this to him?" asked Jonathan.

"Both I guess. We're mainly hoping Eleven can make contact with Billy again and get some answers from him. I know the first time he wasn't to helpful," sighed Steve.

"Not surprising there."

The three headed down the stretch of tracks. They looked around and occasionally headed off the path if they thought they saw something. However, they always came back to the tracks as an hour passed them by and then a second one.

Steve was almost ready to pack it all up and turn around. Before he could though, Nancy yelled out from where she was ahead of them. "I think I found something!"

Jonathan and Steve ran up to where Nancy was kneeling by the tracks.

"Could be a normal plant," Steve said, looking down at the broken fungus.

Nancy looked over. "Have you ever seen something like this in the woods though?"

"No, but it doesn't immediately mean it's from another dimension or something."

Still, even when he said that, Steve looked closer. The outside looked white and kind of mushroom-esque but the inside was black and dry looking with empty spaces here and there.

"We should get Hopper, or someone who at least has a better idea of what the foliage around here should look like," said Nancy.

"Hmm, we don't have anything to mark it but I can stay behind so we don't lose its position," said Steve.

"Will you be alright by yourself?" asked Nancy.

"You won't be long right? I'll be fine," Steve said with a little wave. "Just hurry so I don't end up stuck out in the dark."

With that, Nancy and Jonathan jogged back down the tracks and towards his car while Steve sat back on the rails. His eyes followed them for a bit, a string pulling at his heart. It wasn't painful now. Just a numb feeling like clenching cold fingers.

He wouldn't exactly call him and Jonathan friends, but he had to admit he was closer now to him than before. He supposed it was because before, they'd all known him and Nancy just weren't meant to be. Now he at least felt more comfortable around him and after a few weeks that had been needed to get over his broken heart, he'd finally accepted their invitation for lunch.

Steve wasn't always around them. He did want to give them space after all. But as he watched them go now, he had to admit that they were really the only friends he had left.

And that was another reason to ultimately stay. He'd never had huge ambitions like going to the city, becoming a serious basketball player, and he'd never been definitely set on college, certainly hadn't yearned for it.

No longer was he the social butterfly that ruled the school either. Granted, even if he'd held onto that title longer, it would have disappeared the moment he left school. Now though, he didn't have any great want to go out and be the top dog of anything. It wasn't like he was giving up with life. He'd just become content with himself and his situation.

So what could he do now? Steve had agreed to look for summer jobs with Nancy and Jonathan because he still didn't have a goal in mind, just the idea that he didn't want to be working for his father all his life.

Now tasked with just sitting next to a dead fungus, Steve thought about all of it, trying to put his solitude to at least some good use.

Steve was sitting there still enough that the forest started to come to life around him, no longer silent and dead. It took a little longer before Steve actually saw anything though, his eyes spotting a bird that flew down near the rails.



He was truly frozen, only his eyes following the bird's movements as he just stayed in the moment. The bird was pretty. A blue bird maybe? He wasn't great with his species. It seemed sweet, whatever it was, up until it started to cough and something wet fell out of its beak.

Steve blinked, the magic of the moment broken as he wondered if birds did that like cats. Very slowly, he leaned forward, not wanting to disturb the bird as he looked at the wet form.

"Holy shit..." whispered Steve. He watched as the fungus extended into the Earth, latching itself onto the dirt. He looked back to the dead one and back to this new one. It was pretty damn moist but otherwise they both looked the same. He looked back to the bird that was still there.

He was careful to not make a noise as he let go of his bat. Please don't move, he thought.

Steve's heart was pounding. If he managed to grab this, maybe Hopper would be able to get it to Dr. Owens or something.

"Come on..."

*Crack!*

"Shit!" Steve dived forward but he wasn't fast enough as the bird flew away.

He looked around for whatever had made the noise. He expected something small though if it was something as large as a deer that would have been cool too. What he got was definitely not a deer though or any woodland creature.

"Billy, shit." Steve snatched his bat up and held it in front of him. "Listen. We need you—"

He lashed out reflexively just as Billy launched himself forward, a wild look in his eyes. Steve had meant it more as a warning but the nails had snagged on Billy's arm, tearing up his skin.

"God damn it! Just...stop it! I know you're not Billy! Not really,"

growled out Steve.

That at least kept him from launching forward again. Billy frowned. He looked calculating, like he was studying everything about him and trying to figure out how he could possibly know. Then Billy straightened up. "I can be Billy," he said, the voice for a second expressionless and bland. Then his entire face changed. A wicked grin appeared on his face as he put his hands on his waist and pushed out his hips. "Harrington, look at you and your big man bat. I always took you for a receiver."

"Alright...that was creepy as shit," muttered Steve. His voice had returned to normal and the mannerisms had been seamless. If Steve hadn't known, he would have thought it was just Billy. "You-you can access his mind then, huh? Pick out pieces and mimic him right?"

Back to expressionless.

"Why beat up Billy's father?" asked Steve. "What was the point?"

"Testing."

"So you were testing his...body? Testing the limits, what you could do?"

A quick nod and then a suddenly inhuman quirk of the head and—

"Hey!"

Billy took off down the tracks as Steve glanced back to see Hopper, Nancy, and Jonathan running towards them.

"God damn it," growled Steve. He dropped his bat and launched himself forward after him. If they didn't catch him now then it was hard to say if they would get another chance.

His lungs burned as he forced his breath into a regular pattern and pushed himself on. He was a bit desperate but he kept himself from just going as hard as he could. If he kept his pace steady then there was a chance he could catch up with Billy. Maybe this thing inside him hadn't learned that and it would tire itself out.

By pure chance, something else helped instead.

Without warning, Billy's foot caught a plank and he went down. Steve jumped him but before he could get a good hold, Billy elbowed him in the face.

"Oh hell no, this is not going the way it did last time!"

He punched him hard in the nose just as Hopper stopped by them and grabbed hold of Billy.

Steve looked back but breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing no other cops. This would turn out even better actually. Now they didn't have to worry about some cover up by getting Billy out of jail.

"What did I tell you?" growled Hopper as he snapped the handcuffs around Billy's wrists.

"Hey, I found him—"

"What did I tell you?"

"Right, I'm sorry. I'm sorry ok? In all fairness, this was about some weird fungus we found, not Billy. That happened afterwards," said Steve.

Hopper rolled his eyes and let out a groan as he pulled Billy up.

"And where was the weird fungus?" Hopper sighed.

"Oh uh...back this way. You know, a bird threw up one of the fungus things."

"A bird?" Hopper asked with a disbelieving glance.

Steve nodded. He looked to Billy whose face was again calculating, probably thinking of the best ways to overpower Hopper and get out of those cuffs. Steve made sure to keep an eye on him and felt more comfortable once he had his bat in hand again as they met up with Nancy and Jonathan.

"See? They're right here," Steve said, pointing out the old and new

one. "Huh, one of us must have stepped on the other one. It's broken too."

"Well it looks like a fungus," Hopper shrugged. He took out a knife while keeping a strong grip on Billy. "Here, mark a tree over there and then we can get back to the cabin. We can figure out if that fungus means anything later."

Jonathan grabbed the knife and moved to do so just as Billy suddenly knocked his head into Hopper's nose.

"Shit!" As Hopper covered his bleeding nose, he reached for his gun and pointed it at Billy before he could start running again. "I'll shoot!"

The creature inside Billy seemed to be making an educated guess. It weighed the pros and cons of the situation and seemed to call Hopper out on the lie. Not that anyone would miss him, but they still were trying not to kill a teen here.

"You won't," Billy said.

He started to rush back but Steve acted instinctively this time. He hadn't wanted it to come to this but if this thing was just going to keep trying to run...well. Steve took a swing at one of Billy's legs, snagging the skin and going hard enough to break the bone. He didn't scream. His face didn't change. But he did go down and Hopper quickly grabbed him again.

"Watch him," growled Hopper, "somehow I don't think this thing minds running on a mangled leg."

They moved slowly back, Jonathan keeping the knife just in case as he stayed at the rear and Steve kept to the front. Nancy remained in the back near Jonathan and they went down the tracks, Billy limping along the way. It made Steve glad that whatever this was, it hadn't happened to one of his friends yet. It would have been much harder trying to swing at Jonathan or Nancy or-god forbid-one of the kids.

Once back at Hopper's and Jonathan's vehicles, Hopper nodded for Steve to follow him. "I want you to keep an eye on him while I drive.

Don't need him trying to make me crash."

"We'll meet you at the cabin then," Jonathan quickly said.

Hopper just nodded and the two parted ways, Steve getting in the middle and being careful to avoid sitting on anything Hopper would need to grab with Billy by the window. With his arms tied, it was unlikely he'd be able to unlock the door or anything like that. Again, the main concern was if he tried to make a move at Hopper and they crashed.

They were silent at first, Hopper with his eyes on the road, Steve's eyes on Billy, and Billy's eyes on nothing. Steve wondered if he was going to get back for dinner at all with his parents. There had been plenty of times he'd had to skip out before. He supposed this time wouldn't be much different.

The drive was almost peaceful, at least Billy didn't do anything, but then without warning he started to convulse. Steve's eyes went wide and he grabbed hold of him.

"What's happening!?" yelled Hopper.

"I don't-oh...oh god! That's-hang on. That's what...that's what the bird did."

Steve stared wide eyed as Hopper tried to divide his attention between the road and Billy. With a choked gasp, a solid mass had fallen out of his mouth and landed onto the floor of the truck. It was the same black fungus.

"Seriously? You couldn't have hocked that out the window or something?"

"You're not listening! This is the same thing that the bird did! It's the same fungus," replied Steve.

Hopper had to glance at it a few times before he finally muttered, "God, it is. And that just came out of its mouth? Disgusting."

Steve glanced over at Billy but there wasn't any reaction.

"I'm not sure," Steve slowly said, "if the thing just doesn't care what we say about it, or if it's purposefully ignoring us."

"Neither do I," sighed Hopper. "Maybe El can figure something out."

"Are you going to call Dr. Owens?"

"Not sure."

"What if this...is like a parasite or something?" asked Steve. "What if it spreads further?"

Hopper's frown became more wide set and Steve could immediately tell Hopper had already made up his mind. He could understand his annoyance and irritation over the whole situation though too. They'd gotten about six months of peace after Nancy and Jonathan had finally gotten Hawkins Lab out of the way. Calling Dr. Owens was still the best option though and even though he was a pretty good guy, calling him meant inviting the government back in which was definitely the last thing they wanted.

They didn't have a choice. Not now but when they arrived at Hopper's cabin, that choice became even more limited.

Steve pushed Billy out and dragged him back up by his cuffed arms as he looked over to where Jonathan and Nancy were. The look on Jonathan's face had Steve freezing.

Hopper noted it too. "What's wrong kid?"

"I think...it's just that...Nancy..."

Steve's eyes flashed to her and his gut dropped. He'd been so focused on Billy and making sure he didn't bolt that he hadn't really looked at Nancy or Jonathan. Now he did. He looked at the stiff movement, the intellectual eyes that were taking in everything like it was the first time.

The blank expression.

The unfeeling glance.

“She...she stepped on the fungus and I...I didn’t notice then but she...she wouldn’t talk the whole ride and...”

Nancy. It wasn’t Nancy.

“Why isn’t she running?” Hopper asked as he slowly moved towards her.

“Billy...Billy was gone for like a week,” murmured Steve. He tried to force his brain to think as panic tried to set in. “Maybe that’s...that’s the time it takes for it to fully access the brain. Like all it can do is work on the motor functions right now.”

Hopper hesitated and then grabbed hold of Nancy. “I’m god damn thankful I installed a phone last month,” sighed Hopper. “Jonathan, Steve, tie them both down and keep an eye on them when we get in there. I’ll call Dr. Owens and hopefully we can figure out what to do next.”

Steve was incredibly grateful now that he hadn’t burst open that fungus on the floor of Hopper’s truck as they all headed to the cabin, Hopper doing the special knock before Eleven let them in.

She looked at them, shocked that so many had come. Her eyes went to Billy first and Steve supposed it had to be strange, seeing him here and having seen him in the dark place. She then turned to Nancy and looked at how Hopper was holding her. Her face asked, why?

“It’s spreading,” Hopper muttered as Jonathan gently took hold of Nancy. “I’m going to have to call Dr. Owens.”

A worried look came across Eleven’s face.

“I’ll protect you but whatever this is, we can’t do it alone. We need those damn scientists,” sighed Hopper.

He walked over and held her as Jonathan and Steve forced Billy and Nancy into separate chairs. Eleven helped with keeping them there as they all looked for rope and anything else they could find to tie them down. Once secure, Hopper went over to the phone he’d installed and called Owens while Steve watched Eleven walk over to Nancy. She touched her hand but Nancy didn’t react, at least not normally. She

did look down as if to mentally take in the encounter.

Otherwise, there was nothing else in her eyes.

Eleven looked to Jonathan and Steve. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright Eleven. It's not your fault," sighed Jonathan.

Steve nodded as he sat down so he could look at them both. Why had it been Nance? Why her?

"My fault," Eleven softly said.

Jonathan shook his head again. "No, I just said it wasn't. No need to beat yourself up over—"

"I dreamed," she interrupted, walking away from Nancy to look up at Jonathan. "I felt...them. I felt the spread from the dark place." Here, her face distorted slightly. "What if..."

"No! No, it's not your fault," Steve said. He got up and walked over to her as Jonathan knelt down. He'd never had many interactions with Eleven and she'd spoken even less to him. She'd always been more of an idea to him, an insanely powerful girl that he knew was friends with the kids. But here...here he really saw her as a kid too.

He knelt next to Jonathan and they both took her into a hug.

"Whatever this is, it's not because of you," said Steve.

"It's not," repeated Jonathan. "We'll figure this out El. We promise."

Steve could feel her nod and his grip tightened on her just a little. When they parted, Eleven looked back to Nancy again.

"Do you want me to find her?"

"Yes...but you don't have to do it now," Jonathan said, even though it was clear he wished to tell her 'Now! Find out if she's alright!'. "Rest up first. Besides, if what happened to Billy is anything to go off of, then we know she's at least alright. For a little while anyways."

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One moment she was in the woods chasing after Billy and then the next moment she was looking into blackness. Right away she understood what was going on. She looked at the black water and the nothingness that surrounded her. She took deep breaths and forced herself to remain calm. Hopefully Jonathan would be able to grab her before her body got away. And even if he didn't, Eleven would be able to find her here. Just like...

Billy! He was here as well! She looked around, unsure of how to go about this. That and as far as being stuck in other dimensions went, Billy was probably her last choice of people to be stuck with but hopefully they could learn a thing or two from each other if they met. Might as well take advantage of the situation.

She pushed on, at first just walking aimlessly. However, she stopped when that didn't seem to be changing anything and instead tried to think about what it was like for Eleven when she was trying to find someone. She reached outwards but not with her hand. She thought of Billy Hargrove and reached for him, closing her eyes as she tried to concentrate.

When she opened them again, she saw him sitting there in the distance. He was cross-legged in the black water, his head held down in defeat with his back to her.

Nancy walked a few steps closer, noting how odd it was that there were no echoes and the water made no sound. "Billy."

He jumped up and from where his eyes searched, it was clear he was expecting Eleven but they moved up to meet her face instead. His brow contorted into even more confusion and Nancy figured he still had plenty of questions.

It made sense to answer them and it made sense to try and act reasonably with each other as they really didn't have anyone else to hold onto in this strange situation. Nancy knew she'd have to compromise and deal with Billy Hargrove in one way or another.

But first she took three long strides forwards and slapped him as hard as she could.

“Ah, fuck! Shit what the—”

“That’s for what you did to Steve,” she growled out.

Billy just stared at her for a second and then suddenly let out a sharp laugh. “Damn, who would have thought the little arm candy’s got spunk—”

She slapped him again for that, her lips stuck in a pout and her eyes narrowed. “Listen, I can always turn around and leave if you want.”

“Where? There’s nowhere to go,” snorted Billy. Nevertheless, she watched the fear flash in his eyes. She didn’t know how time worked here but it had been six months out in the real world and she guessed that for a large part of his time here, he’d been alone. She didn’t like being nasty to people but if she had to threaten to leave him behind then so be it.

“I’m sure you have questions,” she said. “I do too. Have you met Eleven?”

“The curly haired kid? Yeah, twice. So you know about her? What the fuck is going on!?”

Let’s see, Steve had suggested that Eleven might have found something else out and had directed Hopper to the tracks. So she’d visited him two times...then it was a safe bet that things were moving chronologically in time with the real world, at least to some degree. She focused back on Billy who gave her a pissed off look, clearly waiting for something.

She knew Hopper wouldn’t like it but Billy was a part of this now. If things went south, either in the dark place or outside it, there was a chance of things going far more smoothly if Billy wasn’t asking questions left and right.

“I know you’re confused,” Nancy said, her glare still firmly in place, “and I will answer your questions. I’ll explain what I can and hopefully Eleven will be back to tell us how things are going on the outside. But if you are not civil with me then I will leave you here in the dark Billy Hargrove and you’ll be damn lucky if Eleven comes

back for you.”

They glared at each other in the dark place but Nancy was internally pretty smug. Billy was too expressive. She could tell he would already agree. He was too terrified of being stuck all alone. The fact that it was so plainly spelled out across his face again made Nancy feel a bit guilty but at least things would go more smoothly now.

“Fine. Whatever.” Billy looked away for a bit, arms crossed and face clearly irritated. Nevertheless, he said, “So apparently nice little Nancy Wheeler knows about this weird shit. What about Harrington, huh?”

The laugh that escaped Nancy’s lips was involuntary and Billy glared at the noise. A smile came across Nancy’s face all the same though as she looked at Billy, his face exactly like hers and Steve’s and Joyce’s and everyone else’s when they’d first gotten dragged into this crazy world. “You have no idea Billy.”

### 3. Hawkins Lab

#### Notes for the Chapter:

\*\*\*IMPORTANT\*\*\*If you read chapters 1 and 2 after 12/5/17 then ignore this. For those that read those chapters before then, I fixed a few small errors and realized that I needed to clarify two things. One, I realized I'd completely forgotten about graduation which Billy, Steve, and Jonathan would have all gone through so I did a quick throwaway line about it so that it was addressed. Second, Steve's parents are planning to leave for a long cruise and as you'll find out in this chapter, they successfully left before the quarantine. I just felt I should clarify that as I've changed something in a later chapter and needed a good reason for Steve's house to be empty.

Anyways, I'd like to say a quick thank you for the overwhelming amounts of support and wonderful comments. It really means a lot! Also, again the amount of chapters in this could change but I feel pretty good with the idea of ending this with 10 so for now that's still the end goal.

And lastly, for those interested I made a Billy/Steve playlist. Doesn't directly tie into this story but making it has inspired me to change a few future plans for this so if you're interested, you're welcomed to check it out: <https://8tracks.com/changethecircumstances/tonight-i-m-turning-left>

So anyways, thank you and I hope you enjoy!

If it had been possible, Jim would have done this in person. Sent the guy a letter or what have you to try and meet where others couldn't listen in. It didn't matter if he trusted Dr. Owens to an extent; he sure as hell didn't trust anyone else the guy was involved with. However, Jim felt that time was of the essence here and though he remained cautious, he dialed the risky number.

“It’s Jim Hopper, Doc.”

Not that either Jim nor Dr. Owens disliked each other, if anything they’d grown to understand and even respect the other after what they’d both been through. But they both equally knew a call from the other would be anything but a courtesy. “I’m going to assume this isn’t anything good,” said Dr. Owens, going straight to the point.

“There’s this...virus...parasite...something. It’s already got two teens.” Jim didn’t bother explaining about the unknown origin, they could talk about all that once something was actually getting done. Besides, Dr. Owens would understand this wasn’t anything normal if Jim was calling him and not the local hospital and Jim didn’t want to be so transparent that it had to do with Eleven, the dark place, and possibly another dimension on the chance someone was listening.

“The implementation of a quarantine?”

“I’d hate to say yes...”

“Then it’s a yes. I’ll call you back with more information.”

Jim sighed. There wasn’t much else he could say but, “Thanks Doc.”

---

Max woke up in her bed. Even if she hadn’t wanted to move in the first place and still didn’t want Neil as a step-father, there was some comfort being back in her room. Her mom had agreed it would probably be good for them both to sleep at home, though that also meant she had to deal with her mom driving her to school too.

She’d probably only ever hated her mom when she’d divorced her dad and announced her plans to marry Neil. Max had come to terms with all that, you couldn’t change the past anyways, but that didn’t mean she wanted to listen to her mom’s worried ramblings about Neil. It didn’t help that every time her mom mentioned Billy, Max had to keep from responding in one way or another too. She wondered what her mom would think if she knew the truth. Max supposed she wouldn’t believe any of it.

A sigh escaped her lips at that, both tired and amused as she looked

out the window. Lucas and Max had planned to go find Steve that day to find out if anything new had developed. She worried about what Eleven had yet to discover and what it could mean for not just Billy but whatever had taken him.

The worry must have shown clearly on her face because her mom misinterpreted it and said, “Don’t worry. Neil will be out of the hospital soon.”

Max attempted to keep from making a face and avoided looking at her mother the rest of the way.

She hurried onto class once at school, Will already there. They talked briefly before more kids came and then Dustin, Mike, and Lucas last minute. Mr. Clarke was still trying to teach them something which Dustin and Will were clearly taking to heart, but everyone else counted the minutes towards their next class and the day went on.

There wasn’t a chance to talk to Lucas alone but Max didn’t really worry about it. They’d get time after school. At least, that was the plan.

Halfway through their second to last period, the intercom went off and it was obvious everyone was hoping they were getting out early. Of course, Max couldn’t come up with any scenario that would allow that, at least nothing good. She was proven right as the principle instead said, “A quarantine has been issued for Hawkins County. All children are asked to go straight home to their parents after classes until further information is learned.”

Lucas turned in his seat, looking at Max with wide eyes which she returned. No way was this a coincidence.

What little attention the students had been giving the teacher flew out the window as kids excitedly talked to each other. They were more intrigued than really scared besides one boy who had a phobia of germs or something.

Mike didn’t hesitate to point a finger at Lucas. “What was that?”

“What?”

“You know what?! That look! You guys totally shared a look,” Mike exclaimed.

“Wait,” Dustin muttered, “you know what’s going on?”

Will looked on silently as Lucas desperately shook his head. “No! Why would I?!”

“Then why did you look at Max?” asked Mike. “Max, what’s going on?”

“Um...nothing...it’s...” Words were lost to her in that moment, her mind going blank as she helplessly looked to Lucas. She was still set on trying to lie her way out of this, at least until Will finally spoke.

“Why won’t you tell us?”

Lucas’ face showed that he also couldn’t lie further what with the way Will was looking at both of them and the sound of betrayal in his voice. “I’m sorry,” muttered Lucas, “we didn’t want you guys to worry if you didn’t have to.”

Just then the teacher spoke up again, trying to reign in the class. “If we could all—”

The bell interrupted her and chaos erupted as kids ran off, the noise only getting louder as other classroom doors opened and kids gathered into the hallway. Even the teacher rushed off, clearly seeing that holding her last period was fruitless as Max and the others gathered in the empty classroom.

“Why wouldn’t you tell us?” Mike demanded again.

“We already told you why,” Max shot back. “And this isn’t about Will or the Upside Down. From what we can tell it’s about Billy.”

“You’re joking,” muttered Dustin. Max shot him a glare. “She’s not joking guys.”

“How does this have to do with Billy?” asked Mike.

“I’ll explain. I promise,” Max said, “but first we need to find the

Chief.”

“So he knows too? Who else?” asked Will.

“Steve and Eleven,” said Lucas. “But finding the Chief is priority one now. No way could this quarantine happen without his say-so. We were actually planning to get a ride from Steve today.”

“My mom can give us a ride!” Will quickly piped up instead. “You know she’ll be coming straight here after hearing the news.”

Mike nodded. “Good idea. Then we won’t have to chase after Steve. Come on.”

They all rushed into the hallway. Since they’d been talking, it had partially emptied out as some kids had gone outside to find parents or older siblings while some went to classrooms and teachers, unsure of what to do. Their group headed to the front of the school and as they walked closer to the road, like clockwork Ms. Byers came to an abrupt stop near them. Considering this was a quarantine, Max imagined the word was being passed over every radio and TV in the area.

“Will! Come here!” Ms. Byers cried out, hugging her son quickly. She’d hovered less in the past months but she was very much hovering now. “Are you alright? Are you kids ok?”

Even if she hovered, Max had to admit that was one thing she liked about her. It was impossible not to feel some form of love and compassion from Will’s mom and what with so little knowledge of what was going on, her attention was definitely welcomed.

“We’re fine,” Mike said just as Dustin piped up, “We need to see the Chief.”

“Jim? What could-do you know what’s going on?”

Will pointed to Max and Lucas. “They do. They said they’d fill us in on the way.”

Ms. Byers let out a soft sigh. She didn’t look scared, not really. And it wasn’t the sound of a broken woman either. It was closer to that of a



mother who'd come to accept nothing would ever be normal again, and at least had a better handle on things now that she'd been through this crap twice.

She nodded and gestured towards the car. "Get in. I'll get your bikes in the trunk."

And that was another thing Max noted in this moment that she greatly liked about Ms. Byers and she supposed the Chief too. They were the only adults, at least the only ones Max knew, that she felt not only took her and the others seriously but succeeded in acting like a parent even if they were treating them like young adults already.

It was a nice thought as Max squeezed into the back with Lucas, Dustin, and Mike. The passenger's seat was pushed back and then Will jumped into the front, closing the door behind him. Ms. Byers wasn't far behind and quickly started the car.

"Alright, Max, Lucas, what can you tell us?" Ms. Byers gently asked though the sense of urgency was still clear in her voice.

Max let out a sigh and looked over but Lucas gestured for her to go first. She rolled her eyes and quickly went on to describe how Billy hadn't been acting quite right and she felt like something had been wrong for a while. Thanks to everyone's questions, she only got to the part of breaking into Steve's home and convincing him to drive them to Hopper's when they finally came to the station.

"Hold on for a second sweetheart," Ms. Byers said, jumping out of the car and rushing towards the office.

Mike turned to Lucas and asked, "Are you sure he didn't just go crazy? You remember he looked ready to beat you to a pulp and then when Steve got involved...well you remember! We were afraid he'd kill him!"

"And he might have," Max retorted. "Billy can lose it sometimes. You know how you might think 'I could do this' and then decide not to? Billy doesn't do that. He's got like, no self-control. But this wasn't Billy. He told us to run!"

“You’re right,” snorted Dustin. “That doesn’t sound like Billy at all.”

“Not what I meant,” sighed Max. “He came back to himself. He was confused, lost. I’ve...never seen him like that. He told us to run as a warning. He somehow knew he wouldn’t have control for long.”

“Why is he so mean?” asked Will, turning around in his seat. He was the only one out of their group that hadn’t directly met Billy or been there for the fight besides Eleven.

“You can say ass,” muttered Lucas. “And possessed or not, some people just are assholes. You can’t get around that.”

Max would have agreed at some point. After all, she’d always rationalized that the reason Billy’s dad yelled at him and even hit him was because he was a jerk. But maybe...maybe Billy was such a jerk because of who he had grown up with. She didn’t say that though as Dustin immediately jumped in.

“Wait? Possessed? You guys didn’t say that!” Dustin excitedly cried.

“Not exactly. We gotta wait for Ms. Byers to get back before we can finish the story,” said Max.

Mike let out a groan as they waited for another minute before Ms. Byers came out with an irritated look on her face. She quickly got back into the car and slammed the door shut. She let out a heavy sigh as so many emotions passed over her face: annoyance, anger, confusion, fear, pain, and regret. Her face finally fell back into one of silent resolve though as she looked at the kids.

“They told me he’s with the scientists. At Hawkins Lab.”

Everyone went wide eyed and looked at each other. For Max, Dustin, and Lucas, it was more one of wonder and curiosity, only slightly tinged with fear as none of them had every actually been inside. Mike, Will, and Ms. Byers were obviously having very different reactions to that.

Despite the looks they gave each other, none of them spoke up against it though and Ms. Byers softly said, “How about you finish your story now sweetheart?”

Max nodded and quickly went back into how Steve had driven them to Hopper's cabin, Lucas interjecting every now and then to add something. They talked about the idea they had and how Eleven had tried reaching out for Billy, the results, and Hopper's involvement.

"She was planning to try to reach him again when I left yesterday and Lucas and I were planning on finding Steve and having him take us back there today to find out if there was any new information," Max quickly said.

"And now Hawkins Lab is back," muttered Mike. "What do you think the Chief did?"

"I imagine what he felt he had to," sighed Ms. Byers. "He wouldn't contact these people lightly, if he even did that."

Everyone silently nodded in agreement at that as Ms. Byers foot pressed on the gas pedal just a little bit harder.

---

A quick lie to his parents' made it so that Steve could stay the night at Hopper's. They asked if he'd be able to see them off in the morning before their trip, and he honestly answered that he wasn't sure. He probably should have felt bad about how uninvolved he was with their life and them with his, but his worry was all used up for Nancy, the kids, and just this damn situation in general.

Jonathan did a similar thing with his mom and somehow convinced Mrs. Wheeler that there was a perfectly good reason as to why Nancy couldn't come home that night too. Steve had no idea how he succeeded on that one. Steve was pretty sure he never could have been that convincing no matter how much charm he could put on.

Steve, Jonathan, and Hopper all took turns throughout the night watching Nancy and Billy, making sure nothing happened to them and that they didn't break their bonds.

Each time it was Steve's turn to rest, he felt like he got little sleep and by the time the sun was up, he could feel a headache pounding in the back of his head. Jonathan didn't look much better. Hopper seemed fine enough but that could have just as easily been the fact he was

better at hiding how he felt.

“I need you three to stay here and watch them,” said Hopper as he looked from Jonathan to Steve and finally to Eleven. “I need to go to the office, figure out what the hell is going to happen here. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

They nodded in unison as Hopper quickly left and Eleven locked the door.

Steve glanced back towards Nancy and Billy before quickly looking away. Still no reaction or movement from Nancy. Billy had shifted a few times in the night, testing the bonds or something, but otherwise he was just as expressionless.

Jonathan looked over to Eleven, a pleading look in his eyes. “Could you...?”

She nodded, going to grab the bandana.

“Can you tell Nancy we’re both here? That we’re looking for a solution and that we think the fungus is what’s causing all this?” asked Steve.

“Yes,” Eleven replied sitting down beside the two. Her eyes looked to both of them before she pulled the bandana on and went back to the dark place.

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“It’s bullshit. It has to be.”

Nancy risked the urge to do something dramatic like pull at her hair or something. “We are standing in two inch water in a dark room with no perimeters and despite there being no lights we can see each other,” she said through gritted teeth. “How is what I’m telling you any harder to believe?”

“This is...weird; I’ll admit. But what you’re talking about are fucking monsters!”

“Exactly! Stop being so small minded and actually listen to me! This is the in between. The Upside Down is another dimension that that

girl, Eleven, opened up accidentally. Monsters came through it once, they came through it again. And whatever's got us could be from there or another dimension!"

"You're talking science-fiction!"

"I'm talking truth! Argh!" Nancy growled out in frustration. "Did you ever wonder why your sister happened to have a needle of sedatives that she so luckily stuck in your neck? Or why Joyce's house was covered in pictures and an utter wreck? This is real! It's not some... some game we're all trying to play on you for fun. Believe me, I would not be here if I didn't have to."

"Well that makes two of us," shot back Billy. He walked around in a circle as he messed with his hair. Nancy had noticed how he was constantly moving, usually pacing or expressively yelling things at her. She didn't think he'd try to hurt her if only because she'd promised to leave him in the dark if he did. Still, he was volatile and Nancy could easily see how he could have done everything that people said about him.

"Are you sure it wasn't you?" Nancy suddenly asked. She'd spent so much time just explaining everything that happened with the Demogorgon and then what happened this past November that she hadn't been able to ask any questions of her own.

"What?" asked Billy, finally pausing if only for a few seconds.

"Your dad. Everyone seems to believe you did it. Maybe you subconsciously—"

"No!"

Nancy stopped. Billy had practically screamed that in her face, a mixture of seething anger and terror on his.

"I would never hurt him! Do you understand?! It wasn't me! *It wasn't!*"

"Alright, alright," Nancy quickly said, quieting her voice as she took a few steps back. She put her hands up, both a warning and a peace offering. "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just trying to figure out

how much contact you might have with your body still.”

She expected Billy to yell something at her but she supposed the reaction she got simply proved how unpredictable and volatile he was. Instead of yelling, he just stilled and without warning collapsed onto the ground.

“It’s real. It’s all real.”

The noise was broken, a half sob as everything that Nancy had told him seemed to come crashing down on him again. She remembered in that second that he was a teenager. She was a teenager. Her ability to just accept all this, to take responsibility and be so willing to do something about it wasn’t normal. It had all come from circumstance, circumstances that she’d had her own denial and grief over, her own hope that it wasn’t all real.

Nancy couldn’t believe she’d almost forgotten what that was like, being a normal teenager whose world view hadn’t just been stripped away from them with a few words.

Billy had so much bravado and put on such a show, Nancy had thought of him as already hardened to all of this like herself and Jonathan and Steve and even the kids. But he wasn’t. It didn’t matter what mask he held up, he was still a teen.

She walked over and sat beside him, a part of her brain taking note of how the water didn’t really feel cold or wet, but she forced herself to focus on Billy instead.

“I was nearly stolen by the Demogorgon,” Nancy said. “My...my best friend Barb was killed by it. I didn’t want to accept any of this for the longest time and I...I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to feel so worthless while Steve and Jonathan and the Chief are out there able to do something. But it’s the circumstances we’re in. We need to accept it. We have to stay strong for them.”

Billy shook his head though. The bite was back in his voice but that utterly broken look and ragged vocals were still there too. “Fucking who? There’s nobody who’s begging for me to show back up again.”

Nancy was silent for a moment. She thought of mentioning Max, his father, his step-mom, his actual mother, but she didn't fully know his relation to any of them. She didn't want to risk setting him off again so she remained silent for a moment until she finally murmured, "You've got to stay strong. You've got to get back to your body. If only so I can give you a real slap now."

Billy snort, a smile actually gracing his lips. "Seriously? Another one? That first one felt real enough!"

"Well just in case then," Nancy laughed.

Billy rolled his eyes before a frown suddenly set into his lips and he asked, "So you seriously pulled a gun on Steve and he still didn't leave?"

"More or less."

"And then he seriously came back to fight off that thing with you? Despite having no idea what the fuck was going on and you waving a gun in his face?"

Nancy's lips quirked upwards. "Yes."

"Why the hell would you let that go? I mean, from what I hear, good old Jonathan did an even bigger number on his face than me but—"

"I don't like people just based on how well they beat up others!" exclaimed Nancy.

"Guess that takes me out of the running."

"You were out of the running already."

"Cold blooded," whistled Billy.

Nancy just rolled her eyes, amused but also a little uncomfortable thinking about that fight between Steve and Jonathan. She looked around and decided that the next moment she was aware or got a chance to talk to Eleven, she should explain everything she could to them.

“You’ve noticed how there’s not really a temperature here, right? And how we don’t get hungry?”

Like that, Billy switched again. He clearly didn’t want to talk about it but Nancy pushed all the same.

“We need to gather as much information as we can so that way the others have a better idea of what they’re dealing with. So have you noticed that?”

A moment of silence and then...“Yes.” He said it through gritted teeth, wrapped his arms around his legs. He wasn’t looking at her now, staring off into the black.

“What else?”

“It...it’s impossible to keep time. It’s easier with you here but before it felt like I was alone for years,” Billy murmured.

Nancy tried to think of another important question just when she looked up and suddenly saw Eleven in front of her. She hadn’t had many interactions with her but she knew how important she was to Mike. It felt wrong, having so much resting on this one kid but Nancy didn’t think she had a better option.

“Eleven, it’s good to see you,” she smiled gently, both her and Billy getting up.

“Jonathan and Steve are here. They wanted to let you know it’s alright. They think it is a...fungus.”

Nancy breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes, that’s what I thought too.”

“It is spreading. Billy threw up a fungus.”

“I threw it up?” asked Billy. “What the fuck?”

Nancy glared at him for the word. “Eleven, what day is it?”

“May fifth.”

“Good,” sighed Nancy. Just a day had passed then. It was odd how it



hadn't felt like a day but then, everything was odd about this place. She glanced at Billy and...oh. Of course. Billy had to have guessed a lot of time had passed going by what she and Eleven told him but this was the first time he'd gotten an exact date, the first time he realized just how much time had passed before anyone had bothered to question something.

And it hadn't even been his dad who Nancy could already tell was possibly the most important person in his life despite the anger and fear that seemed to be associated with him. It had been Max who he'd referred to only as 'a little brat' in the time that Nancy had talked to him.

He looked lost again, scared and lost.

"He called them."

Nancy turned back to Eleven whose voice had broke for just a second, also scared and uncertain.

"Who called whom?"

"Hopper. The scientists," said Eleven. "I think...I think they're coming back."

Nancy felt her stomach drop. After everything she and Jonathan had done Hopper was just going to invite them back in?

"I have to go."

Nancy quickly took hold of Eleven. "Tell them it's not their fault," she quickly said. "I know Steve and Jonathan will blame themselves. It's not your fault either. I got unlucky. That's all."

Eleven nodded. "We will help you."

"I trust you," Nancy replied. "I'll see you soon El."

And like that she was gone and Nancy was no longer holding anything. Slowing closing her hands, she let out a deep sigh before turning back to Billy. He looked like he was wiping away tears, probably still coming to grips with the idea of how much time had

passed. He still refused to look at her though he did speak up.

“Did she really go through all that? The tests?”

It was interesting how he was now focused on what little she'd told him regarding Eleven. She supposed it was his attempts at further ignoring his situation. Nancy nodded. “Yeah, she did.”

Billy crossed his arms and didn't ask for anything more.

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“How's the leg Doc?” asked Jim.

“Better with the warmer months. Still stiff enough to require this,” Dr. Owens replied, nodding towards his cane.

Jim had gone to the office where he'd learned a few more details before Dr. Owens had finally shown up again. They'd agreed to talk elsewhere, that being on the side of the road in Jim's truck. At least he was sure of no bugs or anyone listening in on them.

“So your people are already moving in huh? Back to the Lab?”

Dr. Owens nodded. “It seems bigger than it is but that's because we've just got grunts making sure the quarantine isn't broken as best they can. The team I have is small.”

“How small?”

“Fifteen people. No more, no less, and all handpicked by me and checked multiple times.”

“Now why do I feel like you're telling me this for a reason other than being overly specific?”

“I want her there.”

“No! Absolutely not!”

“Jim. If I wanted to harm her then why did I help in the first place? You told me that she could contact them. That could be incredibly helpful in trying to fix this.”

"I do not want her going back in there," stressed Jim.

"I know that. I understand it better than most but the people I've handpicked weren't part of the original project-they weren't even a part of mine! I've purposely kept them in the dark on the origin of this fungus and on the Upside Down as you call it because I am trying to make this as safe as possible for her. None of them know about the tests."

"It's still a risk," growled out Jim. "What if there's something you've overlooked? Or someone over your head comes down or has a spy within—"

"I know it's a risk," repeated Dr. Owens. "That's why I'm telling you and not demanding it. It's also why I'll let you talk to her about it or decide if you even want to tell her the option is there. But having her there, able to immediately tell us what's going on to both of them and if anything has changed...that's important information that could affect how we view this fungus and its effects."

Jim let out a large groan and rubbed his eyes. He knew Dr. Owens was right and he hated that he'd come to trust the man because it made this even harder. He also knew that if he gave Eleven the option, she'd see herself having only one choice.

He avoided answering Dr. Owens, at least for the moment, and asked, "What's the battle plan? I mean, how the hell can you quarantine an entire county?"

"You can't. Especially not when this fungus apparently affects humans and animals. You said a bird threw one up?"

"Steve did. Then one of the effected, Nancy Wheeler, stepped on it; it got her."

"Hmm. A fast acting spore was perhaps released but then, how is it that only one member was effected? Perhaps not an air born spore then but—"

"Doc," Jim interrupted as he snapped his fingers, "save the science stuff for later. What's the plan?"

Dr. Owens' lips quirked upwards at that as he said, "All roads in and out will be blocked along with the forested areas being regularly patrolled. Don't worry, I'll make sure any imports and exports get in so the economy's protected. For now, we're going to play it like this is just a follow up involving that contamination story that conspiracy theorist and his friends came up with."

"Can you really call him a conspiracy theorist when he's right?" asked Jim.

Dr. Owens simply snorted. "Maybe not. Either way, publically we'll say the quarantine will be in place for the next two weeks, apologize for any inconvenience obviously, ask for the public to come forward if they've seen anything odd, and that they're free to continue their daily schedules as long as it doesn't involve leaving the county."

"I'm guessing you don't think this will take two weeks," sighed Jim.

"It would be preferable but things of this nature are rarely quick."

"The people aren't going to be happy about this."

"I know I'm putting you in a difficult position."

"I think that's all you've ever done for me Doc," snorted Jim. "At least I'm not surprised anymore."

"So..."

"So for now I'm going to follow your lead Doc. This fungus thing is above me."

"I'm glad to hear it. And I promise to be completely transparent. To you anyways."

"Well I figured that," snorted Jim. "So the next step?"

"We need to get the two teens to the Lab. We could just—"

"Nope. Again, no offense Doc but I'll drop you off at the Lab and grab them myself."

“Of course. And the girl—”

“You’ll find out when we get there,” Hopper replied as he started up his car and eased back on the road.

After dropping off Dr. Owens, he drove around to make sure there wasn’t a tail on him. Again, he trusted Dr. Owens for the most part, just not the people he was involved with. Only once he was sure he wasn’t being followed did he head back to the cabin where all the kids were waiting.

“She managed to find Nancy. She’s with Billy,” Jonathan said. It was obvious he had mixed feelings about that. “They’re safe for now. Nancy already connected it all to the fungus and Eleven passed on the information about Dr. Owens.”

“Good. We’re heading over there now,” said Jim.

“So we’re seriously meant to just accept Dr. Owens’ word?” asked Jonathan.

“Listen kid, I know he basically threatened you in the nicest way possible and you and Nancy successfully waged your vendetta against him and everything with Murray, but he protected Will and risked helping him and us when all those other bastards wouldn’t. He’s the best option we have.”

“We’re coming too, right?” Steve hurriedly asked.

“I’ll need you to,” admitted Jim. “It’ll be easier to get them both there if we do what we did yesterday.”

“Me?”

Jim looked over to Eleven who silently stared up at him, waiting for his response. He didn’t want to tell her because he knew how she’d react but he equally knew that if she found he’d lied to her, the outcome could be far worse.

They’d both come to grow a lot in the past months. Jim had to acknowledge the fact that Eleven wasn’t just any kid. He’d tried to treat her like anyone, figuring that was what she’d want and that

being his only experience. However, that took away the fact that she had powers or the trauma that she'd gone through. Something that he thought rational and perfectly logical, Eleven might see in a completely different light.

As for Eleven, she'd had to grow to understand that not all authority was bad. Sometimes motives weren't bad and evil but were just done with the pure want to protect and help.

Since the explosive argument last November that Jim had feared would end any chance of her coming back, they'd both grown from the time spent with each other and he knew in this moment, he needed to tell her the truth. That didn't make this whole thing any easier though. He wasn't even being dramatic when he thought of the fact that he'd die for Eleven if it meant assuring her safety.

He'd been unable to protect his daughter from the cancer but he could protect Eleven from the government and the monsters.

She didn't always need that protection though and sometimes going out on a limb was necessary. Above all else though was never to lie to her. Even when Jim wanted to protect her, he understood that she could handle whatever he threw at her, even if she shouldn't have to.

"Dr. Owens and I talked about this. He wants you there because you're able to contact them," said Jim. "It's completely up to you though."

"I'll go."

No hesitation. Not even a second passed to try and think about it.

"Are you sure?" tried Steve. "I'm sure—"

"I'll go," she repeated, this time putting enough force in her voice to remind everyone that she would be able to get there with or without their help.

Jim watched Eleven's eyes move over to Nancy and he understood where she was coming from. The teens weren't her friends, not like the other kids but Eleven had an impossibly big heart and Nancy was Mike's sister after all. There really had been no need to debate over

what was the right thing to do.

“Seems we’re going to start this new identity early Jane,” Jim said. He looked to Jonathan and Steve. “She’s never to be alone, understood? Even if it’s just Dr. Owens, at least someone is to be with her at all times.”

“I feel like it’s more like she’d have to bail us out if something happened,” Jonathan mumbled which earned a small smile from El.

“Even so,” sighed Jim. “Steve, you grab Billy. Jane, you go with Jonathan and Nancy. I’m assuming you know the way Jonathan?”

He nodded and the small group quickly went about undoing the bonds around Nancy and Billy before dragging them both out.

Jim drove in silence, only occasionally checking to make sure Jonathan was close behind. Billy was shifting again but thankfully Steve was there to keep him from doing anything to drastic. The entire trip was quick and when they arrived at the Lab, Jim noticed how the gate was wide open and there wasn’t a guard out. It seemed they still had a ways to go before they were actually operational.

They parked out front and Steve grabbed Billy with Jonathan gently holding Nancy. Jim immediately got his arm around Eleven. They were only on the outside of the place but he could feel how tense she was. Hell, he was so tense he felt like he might have a god damn heart attack!

Dr. Owens met them at the door. Jim imagined it would have been far easier to get someone else to do it what with his leg but he probably didn’t want Jim to feel any more on edge than he was. Ushering them inside, there were beds waiting for them. Nancy and Billy were strapped down as presumably other scientists came. Nancy, Jonathan, a few scientists went up one elevator and Steve, Billy, and a few others in the second one.

Jim waited there with Eleven still under his arm and Dr. Owens at his side.

“Jane,” Dr. Owens said, “I just wanted to thank you for coming. If

you ever feel uncomfortable or you wish to leave, you are free to.”

She stared up at him with wide eyes, clearly uncertain of his character and his words. Jim simply gave her a comforting squeeze and she finally nodded in understanding and whispered, “Ok.”

One of the elevators came back down for them and Jim was able to let out his own sigh of relief as he stepped in and the doors closed. He’d been adamantly looking away from where Bob had died and he knew the thoughts wouldn’t completely leave him while in this building. At least he wasn’t forced to stand in the man’s final resting place any longer though as they headed up after the teens.

---

Max couldn’t help but nervously bounce up and down in the car. She’d heard so much about Hawkins Lab, both from what had happened last November and from stories of the year before that. There was a certain amount of excitement to be had. The place was infamous in the county after all.

However, she held back those thoughts, knowing that this had to be hard for Ms. Byers and Will. And cool or not, Eleven had been hurt by the people who’d originally worked there. She had to keep that in mind too. Dustin and Lucas seemed to be sharing her mix of emotions, neither having been inside like her.

Once there, she noted the lack of guards and how the gate was wide opened. There were only three white vans, six unknown cars, a truck, the Chief’s truck and...

“Jonathan!” cried Ms. Byers.

“Is that your brother’s car?” asked Lucas, looking out the window as Ms. Byers swerved into a parking space.

“Yeah,” murmured Will, his eyes wide and fearful.

Ms. Byers had barely stopped the car before she was already rushing out. Will ran after her and everyone else scrambled out from the back and slammed the doors shut, rushing up to the front of the building.

Ms. Byers slammed into the door but it was locked. “Hello! Hello!”



she yelled out.

Max and the others all joined in, yelling out and hitting the glass until finally the elevator opened up. An unknown man was coming forward, shaking his head and trying to wave them away.

“Where’s my son!?” yelled Ms. Byers. “Where is he!?”

The man still clearly couldn’t hear them, trying to wave them away and mouthing things that looked like the word security.

One glance at Ms. Byers showed Max that security would be the only way that they would get her off the property but even that Max doubted. She could easily see Ms. Byers fighting off armed personal simply to get to one of her sons.

For all intents and purposes, they were at a standoff when they suddenly spotted movement to the side. It was the Chief having just run out of a stairwell.

Ms. Byers paused though she was still on edge as everyone watched Hopper argue with the man before just pushing past him and opening up the door. They all immediately spilled into the lobby as the unknown guy let out a disgruntled groan and started to stomp off, muttering something about this place not being a daycare center.

“Hopper, what’s going on?” Ms. Byers desperately asked.

He looked to Max and Lucas and let out a tired sigh. “I’m assuming you’ve told them the majority of this so I’ll get straight to the point. The Doc is our best shot at combating this and I’ve already got two teens up there so we really don’t have time to argue about—”

“Wait-two teens? Oh god, Jonathan didn’t come home! He—”

“It’s not Jonathan,” Hopper quickly said. “He’s upstairs but he’s not a patient. He just helped out with—”

“Nancy didn’t come home last night,” interrupted Mike.

Max’s eyes went wide. Now Mike’s sister was affected!? How had that happened? She quickly looked back to the Chief and he looked ready

to deny it but he just shook his head instead.

“I’m sorry kid. Come on, I’ll take you up to her,” said Hopper as he put a comforting hand on Mike’s shoulder.

They crowded into an elevator and Hopper started to fill them in on what Max and Lucas had missed the other day.

“So Billy really is here!” Max exclaimed as he got to that part of the story.

“Yeah, we’ve got them in the same room right now,” Hopper replied. He continued to talk about how they’d gotten Nancy and Billy back to his cabin and that Jane had confirmed they had found each other. It took a moment for Max to realize he was talking about Eleven. And if she was here then this must have been getting desperate.

Max wondered what Billy would look like, what the doctors would say about his condition. By the time the elevator door opened up again, Max felt just as anxious as Mike and the two hurried in step with Hopper until they got to a wide room. On one side was Nancy and the other...

It had only been a few days yet already Billy looked worse. Maybe it was just the white lights and hospital feel but he looked sick. Everyone else crowded around Nancy’s bed and the Byers all hugged while Mike grabbed hold of Ele-Jane, but all Max could do was look at Billy. She glanced to them and then focused back on her step-brother. For most of their time as step-siblings, she’d done everything she could to just ignore him and had silently hoped him and his dad would disappear one day.

Now she’d been thinking about him more than she ever had after the marriage and in a more in-depth way than just ‘Billy sucks’.

Max knew it wasn’t like Neil could be here because he obviously didn’t know about the Upside Down and considering what Billy had done but...

She looked back to the large group protectively crowding around Nancy and then to Billy’s bedside. Part of her couldn’t help but

chastise herself for feeling sorry for him. What he'd done to Lucas and Steve was unforgivable! But...she couldn't help but think about the fights with Neil, the days when Billy might have needed someone but no one had come.

In a way, Max could relate to that. At least the idea of having no one. She hadn't had many friends in California and when the issues with her mom and dad and then the marriage to Neil had become a part of her daily life, she'd just become more distant. She'd felt so alone, like that was the only choice she'd had until she'd come to Hawkins and found the unlikely group of friends she was now with.

It was that thought that had Max walking away from everyone else. She looked down and realized his right arm and left leg were bandaged along with a splint on that leg. Like Nancy, he was sedated and also strapped down, his normal clothes removed and replaced with a hospital gown. His jewelry was gone too and she wondered where it might be.

Max looked at his still hand and very slowly took it. It reminded her of the wedding night, when she'd successfully gotten away from the commotion and crap, the adults acting like this was all a good thing. Billy had found her at the time and the memory was the only distinct time Max could remember fully relating to him other than now.

Billy had slumped down next to her in the empty hall, suit as rumbled as her dress as he'd passed her a stolen beer. She hadn't taken a sip but it had been nice to have something to mess with. Eventually he'd taken her hand, much like how she was holding his now, and he'd muttered, "Sorry you'll have to deal with this hell too." He'd let go and then they'd sat there in silence for the rest of the celebration.

Max pulled over a chair and sat in silence with Billy again. She wondered if he could feel her there at all, what he and Nancy were doing in the dark place. The fact that he wasn't alone in there surprisingly gave her some comfort.

"You alright Max?"

She looked up to see Steve standing by her side. She glanced back

towards everyone else and how no one seemed to notice his absence. "Felt like you were intruding?"

"A bit, yeah," admitted Steve. "Sorry I had to do that to Billy."

Max looked back to the bandages. "You did that? The Chief didn't tell us that part of the story."

"Oh, uh yeah. There was no way he was going to stop. It was the only thing I could do to keep him from running away," Steve sighed.

"Don't sound bad," snorted Max. "You got back at him."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Not completely fair but I'll take what I can get."

He grabbed the only other chair in the room and set it up next to her. For a moment, they remained silent, most of the noise coming from everyone else as they talked back and forth and tried to figure out what could be done for Nancy.

"You didn't answer my question," Steve suddenly said. "You alright?"

Max shrugged. "I don't know. Is it...is it wrong I feel sorry for him?"

"I don't think so. I kind of do too," Steve admitted. "There aren't many people I'd probably say deserve to be stuck in the dark place. They'd have to be pretty awful. And hey, just shows we're better people than him."

"Well that's not hard," chuckled Max.

She relaxed back in her seat, thankful for Steve's presence as her eyes simply went over Billy again. She only looked up when she realized everyone else had quieted and looked to see an older man walk in and carefully close the door.

He looked somewhat resigned that they were all there, his eyes finding the Chief's first.

"Hey, it's not like I invited them," Hopper quickly said.

The man gave Hopper a look like he wouldn't be surprised if he had. Nevertheless, he looked over the group before addressing Hopper again. "Is this everyone that knows?"

"Uh...yeah, it is actually," Hopper replied.

"Good, in that case I only have to say this once. My name is Dr. Owens, some of you already know me. I'm currently in charge of this facility which, to everyone's knowledge, is looking over possible side effects a chemical spillage might have had with the wild life, in particular a fungus with brain alerting possibilities," he said. "Mentions of the Upside Down and Jane's powers are forbidden in the presence of anyone else and in this facility except for this room. Your ever thorough Chief has already made sure the place is debugged."

Hopper snorted at that, clearly proud of himself.

"Why are we keeping it a secret from the people who are trying to help them?" Dustin asked with an over exaggerated gesture towards Nancy and Billy.

"For the moment, I have complete control over this," Dr. Owens replied. "It'll be in all our best interests if we keep it that way. My priority is saving these two and destroying this fungus. If knowledge came that the Upside Down or some other dimension was possibly open, I assure you the government would not hesitate in its attempts to weaponize what comes of it."

"And what are you doing that'll save them?" asked Mike.

"Currently we're running several toxicology tests, a biopsy, among others. We'll keep them sedated for now and then by tomorrow or the day after, we should have equipment fully operational to perform brain scans and the like. I must insist upon all of you, this will not be an immediate fix."

"We know that," snorted Lucas.

"Just promise me that I can stay here," Jonathan quickly said.

"You all are free to come and go-though largely because I don't think

I'd be able to stop you if I wanted to," sighed Dr. Owens. "We're fairly certain this contagion is connected to the fungus itself, not those affected by it so it's safe to be here. I again only ask that you don't inform anyone else of what this is actually about."

"Well, duh. What do you take us for? Kids?" asked Mike.

"Yes," Dr. Owens groaned, "though I suppose I must trust you lot all the same. Now, are we all clear on the ground rules?"

Everyone nodded and Dr. Owens let out a sigh of relief. "Chief, Ms. Byers, if I could talk to you for a moment outside."

The adults left and everyone else started to quickly talk to each other. Questions went round asking "Is that the Dr. Owens that was your doctor Will?" and others like it that were largely thrown at Will and Jonathan. Mainly they were all concerned on if they could trust the man or not and despite Jonathan's dislike of him, Will defended him pretty adamantly, even Jane murmuring, "He helped me too."

It didn't take long for more scientists to come in, saying that more tests needed to be done which required some privacy. It was only once Dr. Owens, Hopper, and Ms. Byers were back and gave the OK that all the kids allowed it.

"I'm staying," Mike quickly said to Hopper as they wheeled his sister away.

"Listen kid. It's hard enough that I have to deal with the town and this quarantine and Mr. Hargrove being on my ass about finding Billy. I don't need more missing kid stories that I need to cover up."

"Just for the night! Please!"

Jane quickly took Mike's hand, squeezing it tight and making it clear where she stood.

"I'm staying too," Jonathan quickly said. "I convinced Mrs. Wheeler that Nancy and I were going on a short camping trip anyways since school was already done for the high school. It would look weird if I was suddenly spotted in town and she wasn't."

“Are you sure sweetheart?” asked Ms. Byers.

“I’ll be fine mom. And I’ll feel better being able to see that Nancy’s being properly taken care of.”

Steve nodded in agreement.

“I’ll call Mrs. Wheeler,” Ms. Byers added, “to say Mike’s at my house for the night then.”

“Fine,” sighed Hopper, “but only tonight. And the rest of you better get on home. Like I said, I don’t need those missing person reports showing up on my desk.”

“Got it Chief,” grinned Dustin.

Hopper just rolled his eyes and checked his watch. “You’ve all got an hour before you need to go back. Steve, I’ll take you.”

Steve nodded his thanks as everyone started to theorize what exactly this parasite could be. Max listened in as the boys started listing off all sorts of references that she had never heard of. At least she was pretty sure it wasn’t D&D related again.

“It’s like the Body Snatchers!” Dustin excitedly said. “Nancy and Billy are totally pod people right now.”

“But those were actual duplicates,” argued Will. “They replaced the people. They didn’t take over their minds.”

“Will’s got a point. This is more like *Alien*,” said Lucas. “You know, with the whole vomiting thing.”

“When did you guys see *Alien*!” yelled Steve.

“Lucas has connections at the video store,” smirked Mike.

“Totally worth it,” Lucas nodded.

“Calm your mom pants Steve. It wasn’t that scary,” Dustin said with a wave of his hand.

“Alien?” Jane asked.

Mike softly explained the movie while Steve shook his head and cried out, “Are you kidding me! That thing is terrifying!”

“I want to see it,” Max quickly said.

“No you don’t,” Steve tried just as all the boys excitedly nodded their heads and said, “You absolutely should!”

“If we’re going horror movies, what about *the Exorcist*?” Jonathan suggested. “It seems more like possession if anything.”

“But it’s not exactly intelligent,” Steve replied, realizing that his argument about *Alien* wasn’t winning. He fully turned to Jonathan. “And whatever it is, it doesn’t seem to progress its control in an intelligent way.”

“Well accurate or not, I still like pod people,” argued Dustin.

Lucas shook his head. “But—”

“We’re calling them pod people then!” exclaimed Hopper, clearly not as amused by the discussion. “There! Done! Pod people it is!”

Ms. Byers covered up a snort with the back of her hand as everyone else either rolled their eyes or nodded in agreement.

They stayed there a bit longer but sadly didn’t get any test results back during that time. Even though the Lab had better equipment than the local hospital, Dr. Owens said it would still take time and some of the equipment still needed to be driven in.

Eventually Steve went off with Hopper and Ms. Byers started to usher the other kids away, leaving Jonathan, Mike, and Jane behind. She drove Dustin and Lucas home first and once it was just her, Max, and Will, she turned back to Max and said, “Whenever you want to go over there, all you have to do is call me sweetheart. I don’t mind taking you. You have the home number right?”

“Yes, thank you Ms. Byers,” Max replied.



"I'll see you later sweetheart. Take care," she said, her and Will giving one last wave as Max left with her skateboard in hand.

As she walked up to the front door of her house, she forced herself back into what should have been a normal mindset. She'd have to act worried about the quarantine and deal with her mom's near hysterical kisses and holding her and she'd have to act like they were all perfectly reasonable reactions. That still didn't keep her mind from staying on Billy and Nancy and the parasite and the Lab while her mother did all those things upon opening the door. Max simply bared with it, almost excited to head back to the Lab tomorrow so she wouldn't have to deal with all this.

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Billy and Nancy turned to see the appearance of Eleven.

"More news?" asked Nancy.

"You're at the Lab."

Nancy winced at that. "I suppose it was the only option," she sighed.

"Mike is here."

"He is! Is he alright?"

Eleven nodded. "Everyone was here. They had to leave but they wish you the best. Jonathan stayed."

Nancy's lips quirked up at that, glad to hear everyone was alright and that at least something was being done now, even if it had to involve the Lab. "Do you know what's going on now?"

Eleven nodded and she started to list off a series of tests, some which Nancy was familiar with and some which she'd never heard of. It was obvious by Eleven's delivery that she'd been asked to memorize the words, her tongue clumsily moving over some of them.

"Can you feel anything?" asked Eleven.

"You mean from my body?" asked Nancy. "No. Why?"

“Another test. Dr. Owens needed your response.”

“Well he has it now. And you said he has us sedated?”

Eleven nodded.

“I suppose I won’t be experiencing those odd back and forth feelings then.” She glanced over to Billy. “Though if we’re going by what happened to you, I wouldn’t even be aware of my body until a few more days had passed.”

Billy just nodded, having remained silent for the entire conversation up until Eleven suddenly said, “Max says she’ll come back. She wanted me to say...sorry you have to deal with this hell too.”

Nancy frowned at the odd wording but before she could ask, Eleven said, “I have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Alright, sounds good. Thank you,” Nancy earnestly said as she watched Eleven disappear from view. She looked back to Billy who was pacing again, knuckles white and arms crossed. “What kind of cryptic thing was that?”

“Nothing.”

“You can’t do that. It’s not fair,” Nancy responded with her hands on her hips for emphasis. “Something that weird clearly isn’t nothing.”

“I don’t owe you anything.”

“Excuse me, but you’d be more lost than Columbus if I hadn’t shown up,” shot back Nancy. “Why would Max say that?”

“It’s none of your business!”

Nancy let out a tired sigh. She could tell Billy’s anger had risen again and it would take time for it to go back to its usual simmering self. However, Nancy was willing to wait. For one thing, there was honestly nothing better for her to do. Not only that, but despite only being with Billy for nearly three days according to Eleven, she was fairly confident in her understanding of Billy. He wanted to talk, even if his anger seemed to get in the way of that.

She eventually sat down, not that she was really tired but just so she was doing something different. Hopefully Billy would feel invited to sit down as well.

As she expected, his anger did eventually run low and he collapsed next to her in a huff. He didn't start talking right away, instead tangling his fingers up in his hair with a scowl clearly on his face. He glanced over approximately three times until he let out a disgruntled sigh and spoke up. Nancy carefully hid her satisfied smile at her suspicions being right.

"I said that to her when our parents got married," he muttered. "Our hiding places from the party turned out to be the same. I had just turned sixteen. I think she was still eleven at that time. Always forget her birthday. But it was obvious how much she hated the situation. Figured some words would be nice."

"But don't you hate her?"

"I don't hate Max!"

Nancy raised a curious eyebrow. She'd purposefully asked the question, wondering what kind of response she would get. From her time spent with Billy, she didn't think he hated her but from the outside it definitely seemed like that was the only emotion felt between the two siblings.

"I don't like her either," growled out Billy. "But fucking law says she's my sister and I just tried to do what I was supposed to. If she doesn't want my fucking help then so be it."

"And the yelling matches that you two got into was you helping?"

"I don't expect you to understand."

Nancy shrugged. "I think I kind of do. Mike and I were pretty close but there was a while where all we did was fight. Don't do that as much now but—"

"We were never close."

"Maybe not in the conventional way but you clearly bonded over the

crappy situation.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it bonding,” sighed Billy.

Nancy let him have that as they sat down in silence for a moment longer. Nancy watched the ripples of the water, moving off into the dark. She wondered if ripples would ever come back towards them. What a scary thought that was.

“I never wanted a sibling.”

Nancy looked over with a raised eyebrow.

“Just divided attention, meant there was someone else who got everything first. Had to drive her places once I was sixteen too, always watching after her and babysitting her and sacrificing my time for her despite the fact we weren’t even related by blood,” Billy growled out. “We moved because of her, had to leave everything I knew. I didn’t want to be a big fucking brother but that’s what I fucking got so I tried. I didn’t want...I didn’t want her to...why does it even fucking matter! I tried to help her and she didn’t want it!”

He was up again, walking round and round. His breathing was irregular as he kicked at the water and looked like he was stuck between screaming and crying. Nancy didn’t believe everything he’d said, not fully. She felt he had left some details out, though whether intentional or not, Nancy wasn’t sure. It was easy to believe that Billy would have forced himself into a false reality to function. Nancy had tried to do that with visiting Barb’s parents, with being with Steve. But it didn’t make things normal. It didn’t take everything back to before and it didn’t fix what had happened. The only difference was that Billy clearly hadn’t gotten to that realization yet.

“I was just trying to help!”

The way he said it worried Nancy though she didn’t understand why. She could tell that it would take time before she could get anything else out of him so she stayed silent instead. There was no way to say how long they would be stuck in the dark place, but Nancy couldn’t help but wonder how much more she could get out of Billy Hargrove and his complicated mind.

## 4. A Last Choice

### Notes for the Chapter:

A massive thank you for all the beautiful comments and kudos! Finally things are picking up and the first proper meeting between Billy and Steve happens! I've been dying to write this out and I'm so happy I finished it on time. Thank you so much and I hope you enjoy!

Despite the excitement that had been building up at the idea of spending her first summer with her friends, the reality had become way more hectic and worrisome. Max tried to go to the Lab as often as possible but most days didn't make a difference. The tests were taking time, the images taking a while to be processed and studied.

And then of course Neil came home and that just really put a damper on Max's mood. The only good that came out of it was that as her mother spent all her time pampering him, it was even easier for Max to disappear with her friends or hop a ride with Ms. Byers or Steve. There were times where all they did was head to the local diner to grab a milkshake or the arcade to play games, but there was still that constant knowledge knowing nothing was really right.

Eventually they took off the bandages on Billy's arm and removed the stitches from the cuts in his leg so they could properly cast it. Each time Max saw him he looked sicker. She didn't understand why she was noticing it now or if it really was a sudden development, but he started to look gaunt and hollow.

Over a week passed and the false restraints of the quarantine were almost up when Dr. Owens finally gave them something. Actually, it was a lot of something. Apparently Dr. Owens had been sitting on quite a bit of information though he claimed that was because he'd wanted to collect all he could before giving them his own conclusions.

Everyone made sure to be there, even Ms. Byers. As Dr. Owens sat them down, Max saw that the Chief was the only one that didn't look

surprised by his words. Dr. Owens must have talked with Hopper first which irritated Max but at least the man was being honest now.

“For all intents and purposes, the fungus is very much like any fungi we may find in our world,” said Dr. Owens. “At least while it’s still a fungus. Though I can’t prove this, I think the fungus itself is an adaption to our world to protect it until someone unlucky enough comes along and breaks what I can only call an egg.

“They aren’t spores but almost like individual cells, bacteria if you will, just on a larger scale. They absorb into the host, able to go through clothing if necessary, and spread through the bloodstream with a large mass of these cells collecting in the brain where they form the parasite. As it grows, it attaches itself more readily to the brain and has a better hold of the host’s brain functions, putting the actual conscious of the host in an almost coma state which in this case means dropping them in the dark place.

“I don’t think these organisms are actually intelligent. Any intelligence we’ve seen so far is simply what they’ve successfully picked up and mimicked from the signals of the host’s brain. You mentioned how Billy Hargrove became angrier. It was likely the parasite latching onto those memories and chemicals that spur that anger and using it to its advantage. Simple as that.

“From some of our other tests, the other parts of the organism continue to work as one and change the host’s body so that it’s viable to produce fungi of its own and the cycle starts over again. Without a host, these things wouldn’t exist. Though molecularly different, the process is similar enough to parasites in our world.”

Here Dr. Owens paused and started to pull out images which he placed against light so they could better see them. There were multiple images of the brain that Max didn’t understand, but she could still tell didn’t look good. He seemed to be sectioning off two groups and then also placed an x-ray up against a separate light.

Despite some of his words going over their heads, everyone remained quiet throughout his monologue. It was like they were all waiting for the other shoe to drop and were afraid if they questioned him, it would come all the sooner.

That was doubly so for Max as she looked at the images and she knew. It didn't matter that Dr. Owens started to talk about what each image was meant to show first. It didn't matter that he was spending his time on describing what the parts of the brain did, how the parasite affected each one.

Now it almost seemed like Dr. Owens was the one buying for time. Max didn't care what he was talking about. He just kept going and going and—

“How long?” Max choked out.

Everyone froze, turning to look at her as Lucas gently took her hand.

She used her free one to point at the massive spread of white. “I know that's Billy's.” She pointed to the x-ray. “I know that's his.” She turned to look at Billy, face smooth and expressionless. It had gotten this far and not even Max had noticed. Not until it looked too late. She turned back to Dr. Owens. “How...how long does he have?”

A soft sigh escaped Dr. Owens lips. The sound was even more terrifying to Max. It sounded like defeat. And then Dr. Owens knelt in front of her, tried to be comforting but it only made the hair on Max's arms stand on end.

“This parasite has an exponential type growth. It starts slow and then rapidly takes over the host producing as many fungi as it can until the changes are too much for the host's body to handle and they die,” Dr. Owens answered honestly. “Since he's been sedated, the growth has slowed but only partially. We can perform surgery on the main mass tumor and if that's gone, with some added antibiotics, there's a chance the body will purge the rest of the foreign masses.”

“And the chances?” whispered Max.

“I can't be—”

“Tell me the chances!” demanded Max. The yell broke the silence and Dr. Owens' attempts at comfort. She could tell no one was calm, all wringing their hands or unable to look her in the eyes.

All Max wanted was honesty. That's all she could get from anyone

right now and with another sigh, Dr. Owens gave it. "Thirty-five percent. And that's not including the idea he'd walk away completely unharmed. It's an extremely invasive surgery."

"And if we don't?" whispered Max.

"Perhaps a week more before even surgery is out of the question," Dr. Owens replied. "I believe we can find a cure. In fact, we're already working on it right now. A way to completely purge it from the system without being invasive whatsoever. But I'm afraid your step-brother can't wait that long."

"I'm sorry Max," murmured Hopper, placing a hand on her shoulder as those closest to her mimicked him.

Max couldn't believe it. She'd wanted Billy out of her life for so long and now here she had it. The very real possibility that he'd never wake up again. She'd always thought the moment would come with some sigh of relief but this...this wasn't what she'd wanted. If she'd wanted that she would have actually hit him with the baseball bat full of nails, not just threatened him.

And the way everyone was looking at her now...she couldn't take it! They didn't understand how hard this was, realizing that she cared about what happened as she tried to rationalize what her step-brother had done. If only she'd bother to pay attention sooner...if only she'd reached out...

Without warning, Max was up and out of the room.

Already she was thinking about what to tell Billy. If they even should tell him. It wasn't like he had an option. Not really. Just give up or go through with the surgery. But even if that didn't work, then what? Would he just be trapped there forever? She didn't want that for him! She didn't want that for anyone!

She paced back and forth and when one scientist who was walking down the hall looked ready to approach, probably to say something stupid like 'you should have a chaperone', she shot him a death glare that would have made Billy proud. The man quickly went to the other side of the hallway and went past while Max went back to



pacing up and down.

What was she supposed to feel? How could one feel in this situation? Everything seemed to contradict each other as she wanted to scream at how unfair this was while simultaneously collapsing as she wondered, what was even the point?

When she turned round again, she was met with Lucas and Steve. For just a second she paused, wondering what she could possibly tell them. Could they help? Could they even understand? But she shook her head and started pacing again.

"Leave me alone," she mumbled as she avoided their eyes.

"I'm sorry," Steve said. "I know—"

"No! You don't know! I just...he could die and I don't..."

"Max," Lucas gently said as he got closer. "We get it. Out of everyone, I think we get it the best."

"But you don't! He...he's such a jerk and...and..." She was crying now. The tears were coming and she couldn't stop them as Lucas and Steve finally reached her. She tried to push them away but Lucas held her tight. It helped that Steve was wrapped around both of them in a strong hug, keeping the three of them together.

"You know," mumbled Lucas. "I probably thought it once or twice. Figured he'd be better off gone but...it's different seeing him there and thinking he's dying and he could be trapped forever and...it's scary. I don't know why and I kind of hate myself for this but I'm really damn scared for Billy."

"Language," Steve mumbled and the kids let out choked laughter as he squeezed them just a little tighter.

When they all started to let go, though only enough so they weren't squished against each other, Steve looked at Max and earnestly said, "If anyone is stubborn enough to beat an alien parasite and come out on top, it's Billy. We've got to stay positive."

Max nodded and wiped at her tears as Steve finally backed up though

Lucas kept his arm around her.

“We...we should tell him. Don’t you think?” asked Max. “It’s not fair if we don’t.”

Steve nodded. “I gotta agree with that. As awful as this all is, I feel like I’d rather be told if it was possible.”

“Come on,” Lucas gently urged and Max let them lead her back into the room, her tears fully gone.

“I know it’s upsetting news,” Dr. Owens sighed, the apology clear in his eyes.

“And Nancy?” asked Mike. Apparently they had paused in their conversation when Max had left.

“I’d say we have two months, possibly three if we keep her sedated, until surgery would likely be needed if we don’t want to risk any permanent damage,” replied Dr. Owens. “I’m fairly positive we’ll find a cure sooner than that.”

Mike nodded, taking comfort in Jane’s hand as Ms. Byers gently held her eldest son.

“I’m already having a room prepped and any other equipment flown in today,” Dr. Owens said. “I’d like to begin as quickly as possible.”

“He should know first,” argued Max.

Hopper looked to Jane. “Are you alright going in and telling them that?”

“You think he should know?” asked Jane.

“It’s not fair of us if we don’t.”

Jane let out a soft sigh but nodded. “Ok.”

---

Being inside Hawkins Lab had been difficult for Jane, especially considering how she was there basically every day now. It helped

that Hopper was often with her and if not him, then Jonathan. Mike and Max and the others came nearly every day and Dr. Owens' kindness at least didn't seem false.

Despite the memories the place brought up though, she felt like this would be the hardest thing for her to do. She'd gone back and forth constantly, relaying information from Nancy to Dr. Owens and back again. It was tiresome and her sleeves were stiff with dried blood now. But being asked to tell someone such awful news who was already in such an awful place...Jane hated it and she hated how she knew this would go.

She avoided looking at everyone this time as she prepared herself and delved into the dark place. At least now she could find them easily. She didn't want to drag this out any longer than necessary.

Billy and Nancy turned to her right away, neither spooked by her sudden appearances now.

"He has to...the doctor..."

"What's wrong?" Nancy quickly asked. She approached Jane, her eyes worried despite the calm she was asserting. "What happened?"

"It...they have to do surgery," Jane said. "Not on you. You have longer but on...on him."

She pointed towards Billy without looking up.

"No other choice. There's isn't a chance...a good chance...of you making it," whispered Jane.

"What's happened?" Nancy urgently asked. "What have they discovered—"

"No!!!"

Jane looked away from the cry. She didn't want to see this.

"Billy, we should get as much information as—"

"I don't want to hear it!"

“Billy—”

“Shut up! Shut up!”

The tortured yelling made Jane chance a look up but once she saw, she couldn't tear her eyes away. Billy was grasping at his chest, breathing fast and irregular. The look on his face, she couldn't understand what was exactly going through his head. The only thing she could pick up on was the pure panic there as tears welled up in his eyes. He reached out for something, trying to find purchase on anything, a wall to lean against, a chair to hold onto. But of course there was nothing and Billy collapsed.

Nancy immediately let go of her, rushing to Billy's side. He tried to push her away with broken shouts of “get away from me!” but Nancy fought him until her arms were wrapped around him and held him tight.

“It can't be that bad,” Nancy tried, “Eleven! The chances—”

“Thirty-five,” Jane murmured, sorrow dripping from her voice. “It doesn't include any permanent damage that could occur.”

Nancy's face went white but she still didn't let go of Billy. “It's the only way?”

Jane nodded. “You have longer. He...he'll die if we don't.”

She hated the way Nancy looked now, the way Billy still gasped for air as the panic took him. She couldn't take looking at the scene anymore. She was so powerless, powerless to help this pain and all this possibly because of herself.

“I'm sorry,” whispered Jane and with that she was throwing off the bandana and rushing out of the room, wiping away the tears and blood on her nose.

“Jane! Jane! El!”

She only stopped when she felt Mike grab her arm and pull her to a stop. She rapidly turned and held him tight as she mumbled, “I can't help. I can't help,” over and over again.

“What are you talking about?! You’ve been a huge help,” hissed Mike. “You’ve done all you can and now the Doc is going to do everything he can. Don’t blame yourself.”

“He’s...he’s so scared and...and there’s nothing I can do,” she choked out. “What if he gets stuck there? What if—”

“We can’t focus on that. There’s no point,” Mike interrupted. “If it happens then we’ll cross that bridge when we get there but right now we just got to hope. Ok? His chances aren’t zero yet.”

She nodded her head before letting herself get wrapped up in Mike’s embrace again.

---

Nancy had gotten to know quite a bit about Billy. He never did bring up his cryptic phrasing again about trying to protect Max, but there were certainly other things she got out of him. She found out his mother left him at age three, listened to his stories about moving around a lot, his time on the swim team at his middle school until he punched a fellow kid.

She talked about herself too because it was only fair. Most of her recent life involving the Upside Down had already been told so she talked about dressing up as an elf for Mike’s D&D games, her mom forcing her to enter a school beauty pageant at age seven, and anything else that came to mind.

The last person in the world she’d ever expected to get close to was Billy yet here she was trying to keep him from falling apart again. She couldn’t blame him for the fear. She was scared as well, wishing she’d managed to get out more information from Eleven about her own condition and how long she had until surgery was absolutely necessary.

But knowing that she at least had much longer left, she didn’t focus on the what-ifs of never doing certain things or seeing certain people again. She focused on Billy who’d already been stuck here for six months alone and now had the very real possibility of either getting stuck forever or just disappearing, never to wake up again.

He liked to be in control. That was the most obvious thing Nancy had learned about him and this was the most out of control a person could be. He had no say in what happened to his life, no way in fighting it. All he could do was trust some people he'd never met with probabilities that were stacked against him.

It seemed that every few seconds one of two things would happen. He'd try to struggle again, would try to get out of her embrace. She never let him though. He needed this, the only form of comfort that Nancy could give. And the second thing, when he wasn't struggling, he looked like he'd already admitted defeat. The fear would fully blossom in his eyes and he'd whisper, "It's been too long. I'm stuck. I'm never getting out. I'm stuck."

He said those words so many times and Nancy couldn't think of a single thing to say in response. She was as powerless to what could happen as Billy, and all she could do was hug him as hard as her arms would allow it.

She kept doing it, holding on tight up until the moment Billy disappeared.

---

Steve still felt bad about never getting around to see his parents off before they left for that cruise. They'd managed to get out before the quarantine meaning Steve had the house just for himself. However, he was actually pretty happy about that now. They'd called a few times, wishing him well and hoping he was alright and apologizing profusely for the bad timing but it took all Steve's will not to just thank them.

It made basically living at the Lab a great deal easier. He'd promised Max that he'd watch Billy when she couldn't be there. The surgery had gone as smoothly as could be expected and everyone had stuck around all day, waiting for something to happen.

But he never woke up.

Again, everyone had their own lives and responsibilities to deal with so it wasn't like they could permanently stick around. Steve knew how worried Max was though and he knew he didn't have a life

outside of this so he agreed to continue to wait, to see if Billy would wake up despite the days that had already passed.

God...if.

The fact that there wasn't even any certainty in that was awful. Billy's heart had kept steadily beating throughout the surgery and it kept beating now. Though the pods-they'd decided on that as a nickname for the pieces that weren't the brain parasite itself-were still riddled throughout his body; he should have been able to wake up now, at least in theory. Yet his brain had shown low responses as if he was in a comma and there wasn't much else they could do.

Jane had been against going back to the dark place and not even Max tried to make her go this time. Everyone was kind of just holding onto hope. If they didn't look in the dark place, confirm that Billy was still stuck there, then there was hope. Most of that hope wasn't for Billy himself, Steve knew that and he was sure Max knew that too. It was more so that if they couldn't find a drug that could eradicate the parasite from a person's body, then surgery could be the only way for Nancy to survive. Obviously Billy's condition had gone far past the point they would allow Nancy's to get to but it was still an unnerving thought if this failed.

But if Billy made it, then there was still hope for Nancy. Steve felt that. He wasn't going to lie and say he wasn't going to base what happened towards his expectations for Nancy. But his want for Billy to get better was actually there as well. It was largely based on the complex feelings Max was going through and he could tell the young girl would blame herself if Billy died.

Not only that but clearly Max had been re-thinking her thoughts on Billy and it made Steve wonder if there was anything else worth knowing about the teen. After all, if Nancy and him had been able to form a sort of truce and stick by each other's side, then they must have reached some agreement which proved Billy wasn't just the psychotic teen that had beaten up on him.

So Steve stayed by his side just like he'd promised Max. He talked with Jonathan a lot when the others weren't there since he was still by Nancy's. Jane wasn't as talkative but Hopper brought a board

game over at some point, giving the three of them at least something to do other than silently wait for...anything really.

Steve spent Friday night with nothing new occurring and on Saturday it was much of the same. Of course, the kids came and that definitely put a smile on Steve's face but once they were gone, it was back to watching and waiting.

They'd had to partially shave Billy's head and it was now bandaged as he breathed in and out, slow and methodical with still no sign that he'd wake up.

Saturday night ended up being the same and Sunday had everyone visit just like before. And still nothing new.

Steve assured Max that he'd still stay just like he promised and the only reason he left was to grab some more clean clothes.

He talked with Dr. Owens about how it looked like Billy wouldn't come back but Steve didn't want to give up just yet. As far as he knew, everything in the surgery had gone exactly as expected. There wasn't a reason for him not to!

On Monday morning, Hopper took Jane back to the cabin for a special breakfast and probably a much needed break from the Lab. Steve suspected that she'd try to contact Billy again and Hopper was giving her a break before she did that.

Jonathan was off using one of the facility's showers and that left Steve alone for the moment. Once Jonathan got back, Steve would probably take advantage of the shower too and finally get out of the damn uncomfortable chair. Jonathan actually had a bed that had been wheeled in a while back since he'd been staying here for about half a month now but Steve was still stuck with the awful chairs.

With that thought, he stood up and stretched, walking the perimeter of the room just to give himself something to do. He paused by Nancy's bedside for a bit, gently squeezing her hand before he started to head back over to Billy and—

Froze.



The shift in movement. The blearily opened eyes, confused and somewhat pained. When his head slightly turned and their eyes connected, Steve finally broke out of his trance and rushed forward.

“Billy! Is...oh shit what if...is that really you? God how do I prove—”

“Stop fucking rambling Harrington. My head hurts,” Billy mumbled with a slight groan. He closed his eyes and for a split second he looked like he was unconscious again. Maybe Steve had imagined it. Maybe-but no. Billy opened his eyes again and looked around. “Why am I strapped down?”

“Uh, precautions. Just in case.”

“Well get them the fuck off me.”

Steve thought about waiting. He would have really liked it if Jane was here so she could do a quick check that this really was Billy but then...even if it wasn't, he was in no state to fight or run. And if this was Billy and their roles switched, then Steve sure as hell wouldn't want to be tied down to a bed after finally being in the real world after over six months.

He decided to take a chance and as he undid the bonds, he watched as Billy carefully pushed himself up on shaking arms. Though he hadn't had full control of his body for quite a while, his body had only been stagnant for the past two weeks. Steve guessed the shaking was more from the strangeness of it all than actually being overly weak.

“Is this real?”

Steve's head snapped back up after undoing the last buckle. “What?”

“I asked is this fucking real. Christ, don't you listen?”

“Well glad to see you're still an asshole,” sighed Steve. “God, yes it's real! Dick.”

He mumbled the last word and stood up straight. To think he'd felt sorry for him! And what was the first thing he did? Immediately fall back to being an asshole. Steve honestly didn't know how Nancy

hadn't strangled him because he was...thinking...

His own thoughts fell away. He'd even planned to just up and leave since he'd figured their personalities weren't big enough for one room. However, now he felt as shocked as he had when he'd seen that first sign of movement. "Billy?" he softly asked.

"It-it-it's real. I did-didn't-didn't d-die..."

All of Steve's thoughts of Billy just going back to his prickish self left his mind. He went to his side and gripped Billy's shoulder, shocked when Billy grabbed hold of him and held on, sobbing into his shirt. Billy had wanted to know if it was real...so he'd used Steve as his test. He hadn't just been trying to be a dick but testing the waters.

Clearly he'd gotten the answer he'd hoped for going by the shuttering sobs that wracked his whole body as Steve could only hold him. He didn't even stop when Jonathan came back, eyes wide as he froze in place. Steve waved him away to go grab someone as best he could, not fully able to get out of Billy's grasp.

Suddenly his hope didn't seem so naïve. Billy was alive. That meant Nancy had a better chance. It meant they hadn't doomed Billy to eternity in the dark place. It meant Max would see him again, that her fears hadn't been realized. She wouldn't blame herself. Neither would Jane.

Steve breathed a sigh of relief at that thought as he awkwardly patted Billy's back, unsure of when letting go would be considered too soon.

---

Nancy spent what felt like an eternity walking in circles, wringing her hands and wondering if Billy had made it. She couldn't have been alone long but it made her wonder how Billy hadn't gone mad, though she supposed he'd been arguably broken by the experience either way.

Back and forth.

Again.

Turning left.

Darkness.

Right.

Darkness.

What if he hadn't made it? People far better than Billy hadn't made it before. Perhaps he had died, just gone like that. Would they let people know, at least give a partial truth like with Barb? Or would Hopper have to pass him off as forever missing? Would anyone care?

Walking back and forth.

Darkness.

Boredom.

Anxiety.

Nothing to do...nothing.

No answer.

God, why couldn't—

“Eleven!”

Nancy felt Eleven suddenly collapse against her, hugging her tight and shaking. “I should have come sooner. I'm sorry. I...I was afraid. I didn't want to know.”

“Don't blame yourself! It's ok. It is! What day is it?” Nancy asked, hugging the girl one last time before looking down at her.

“May 27<sup>th</sup>.”

“Five days...? Billy, is—”

“He's alive.”

Nancy let out a gasp of relief, several tears falling from her eyes.  
“Oh...oh thank god.”

“They’re working to find a cure. It...it could take as long as a month. Maybe more,” mumbled Eleven. “But I’ll visit you each day! I promised Mike.”

“Thank you. Having you here definitely makes things easier,” sighed Nancy. “How is Billy though? I mean...is he...”

“He’s been throwing up. Getting the...pods out of his system,” Eleven replied. “He punched a doctor.”

“He-oh god why? I mean, I’m not surprised but just...why?”

“He panicked some. Doesn’t like hospitals. I don’t like them.”

“Well...that’s better than just doing it for spite I guess,” sighed Nancy.

“I have to go soon. But I’ll find you ever day. Give you updates,” Eleven said with an encouraging nod. “Jonathan is still here. He won’t leave until you open your eyes. His words, not mine.”

“Of course he said that,” Nancy murmured with a soft smile. She pulled her into a hug again, holding onto that feeling of contact knowing that she’d have to wait around twenty-four hours before she felt it again. “Thank you Eleven.”

---

Billy was thankful Steve wasn’t around now. Granted, the doctors had him sectioned off to do more testing so it wasn’t like anyone could see him but...god had he really cried all over Steve Harrington’s shirt? Looking back on it, it felt more like a dream than a memory, but going by how fucking dry his own eyes were, it had to have happened.

And yeah, it wasn’t fucking significant that it was Steve. Whoever had been by his side, he probably would have just clutched onto them like his life depended on it. He hadn’t realized it while in the dark place but actually being in this world, being able to feel air around you and temperature and scratchy sheets and just touch in general...there really wasn’t anything like it in the dark place. And up until Steve had placed his hand on his shoulder, he hadn’t really

realized just how touch starved he was.

After that moment of bone crushing relief had passed though, there was less need to be in contact with another human being, though that probably had to do with the fact that he was being surrounded by doctors. When the first guy in scrubs had appeared, all sorts of memories had started to pop up in Billy's head that he had never wanted to revisit again. Still in shock over the fact that he was alive and out of the dark place, not all his thoughts had been with him so seeing a guy that clearly belonged in a hospital caused Billy to do one thing. He punched him.

Maybe that was why they'd carted him off for further testing, a solitary punishment for breaking the nose of one of their own. Either way, none of the physicians really talked to him as a person and as each clinical question or simple test came his way, Billy honestly couldn't tell if minutes were dragging by or the next day had already come and gone.

He'd started throwing up midway through, twisted root like things and white masses which the doctors assured was normal and he shouldn't mind it. He politely told them he'd punch another one if they told him something that stupid again.

Each heave came fairly regularly and it at least kept him from having to talk too much. It also made it hard to follow a clear line of thought though, each one interrupted by the vomiting. Still, he managed to figure out something odd.

None of the doctors mentioned the dark place or the Upside Down or if they'd figured out the origin of the fungus. He thought about asking them but then thought of what had happened to Nancy and Jonathan and just the whole government conspiracy thing in general. Despite Nancy knowing where they were from what the girl had told them, it had been clear she wasn't happy about it.

So Billy kept quiet about those places and mostly kept quiet about the questions except for the occasional 'fuck you' and violent vomit show. Now that his relief over being alive was done, he was extremely on edge and the only reason he hadn't bolted was how tired he felt and how much his throat was burning.

After what felt like ages, and Billy was almost tired enough to just fall back asleep, the doctors left and someone new came in.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Sam Owens. It’s a pleasure to properly meet you.”

Billy just raised an eyebrow and grimaced. This guy didn’t seem as false as the others but still... And then suddenly he was leaning much too close for comfort. Billy didn’t really flinch because he had nowhere to go and was far too tired anyways. He still looked worryingly over at him though until the new guy murmured, “Don’t worry. You’ll get the full story soon.”

He then leaned back and smiled again. “You’re doing far better than we could have hoped.”

Billy just stared at him for a moment, violently threw up what felt like a lung, and then glanced back up with an incredulous look. “Yep. Feel great,” he hoarsely responded.

“To be perfectly honest, we thought that if you were to survive, there might be some noticeable defect in your mental faculties or perhaps even paralysis. You’re extremely lucky.”

“I can feel that,” Billy sarcastically mumbled with a forced smile.

Dr. Owens let out a long sigh like he was used to dealing with these kinds of people and then said, “The vomiting should ease after today though I expect it will continue until your system is fully purged. We’d like to keep you under our care for at least another month—”

“No,” choked out Billy.

“Perhaps I should rephrase it. You don’t really have a choice.”

“I don’t like—” Billy felt his stomach spasm and suddenly puked again. “I...don’t like...hospitals.”

“This isn’t a hospital. You’re at Hawkins Lab.”

“Looks like a hospital. Feels like a hospital. I don’t like hospitals.”

“I can’t just release you like nothing’s happened,” sighed Dr. Owens.

“We need to keep a record of this and make sure you’re on a fit track to heal.”

“I don’t want to be here,” hissed Billy.

“To be perfectly honest, I’d prefer not to be here either,” Dr. Owens said with a forced smile, “but we all have our parts to play. After all, you’re currently wanted by law enforcement. I wouldn’t advise leaving here without Chief Hopper’s say-so.”

Billy closed his eyes at the thought. A whole month in a hospital? He couldn’t do that. No, not again. Not this. He’d just come out of the dark place. He couldn’t be stuck here now! Not...not this...please...

He glanced up and watched as something changed in Dr. Owens face.

“I can get you some proper clothes and I’m sure we can have someone get your own later on. You’re also free to move about parts of the facility though I’d be careful with that leg. We can make this as not-like a hospital as possible but for your safety, you need to stay here. Perhaps...perhaps we can lessen the time. Perhaps not a full month but you can’t be released just yet.”

Billy stared for a second, not wanting to give in but...yeah. He didn’t really have anywhere to go and certainly wasn’t fit to bounce on this place without warning. He gave a shaky nod. “Well get me some fucking clothes then. Back’s cold,” he mumbled out before a sudden fit hit him again and he vomited into his bucket.

“I’ll get you a new one of those too.”

Dr. Owens left for a bit and came back with a bag of materials and a new bucket. He gestured for Billy to get off the bed as another doctor came in and took the bucket Billy had been puking in.

“Try not to throw up in the toilet,” Dr. Owens said. “It’ll be useful to study this.”

Billy grimaced and eased onto his good leg. He didn’t wave away Dr. Owens help only because he was shaking so badly from all the puking.

He walked him over to a bathroom, placing the bag in the sink and the bucket by the side.

“There’s a razor in there too if you need it. I’ll be right outside,” he said.

And like that, Billy was finally alone. Looking down at his shaking self, he didn’t know why he had healing scars on his arm or why he had a cast on the lower part of one of his legs. Eleven had failed to mention that and he wondered what else she’d failed to mention too.

But there was only so much time he could spend looking down at himself. Ever so slowly, he forced himself to look up and stared at his reflection in the mirror. God he looked gaunt. And the bandages wrapped around his head...he could tell where they shaved it. Fuck. There went the good looks. Well...maybe not completely. He could probably work with it once his hair grew a little. And his facial hair, Christ he looked old and tired.

He decided to do that first, going to shave it all off for now. He’d bother with specifics when he wasn’t stuck in this place and still didn’t feel like he wanted to die despite how happy he was that he was breathing again.

It took a few times to get it all off, having to pause so his stomach could heave its contents up again. Once done, he looked at himself again and let out a small sigh. At least he looked younger now and his overall gauntness wasn’t as defined by a growing beard.

He looked through the rest of the bag that Dr. Owens had given him, pulling out plain shorts and a shirt. There was a smaller bag which held the jewelry he must have been wearing last. He wondered what happened to his clothes. Judging by his leg and arm, he supposed nothing good.

It took achingly long, pulling the hospital robe off and then getting the shorts over the cast and up, switching between sitting on the toilet and standing. He pulled his shirt over his head, careful that it didn’t catch on the bandage. He wished he had some of his own clothes but it was better than the robes. Pocketing the jewelry, he puked again and then carefully eased open the door.



Dr. Owens was waiting there with a wheelchair.

“Better?” he asked.

Billy reluctantly nodded. Normally he would have been crasser and far less open but he was just too tired to put on a front. All he could really do was hold on tight to the bucket and prepare himself for the next round of spasms.

“Once you can keep things down for a longer time, I’ll give you something to help with the burning sensations in your throat and stomach,” Dr. Owens said as he started to push him out of the room and through a hallway. Some places still had that hospital look, others made the place seem more like an office.

They went into an elevator, up a few levels, and then got wheeled into another hallway.

“Quite a few people are waiting for you.”

Shit! Was it Steve? Max? He didn’t want to deal with people! Not now! None of his defenses were up.

But before he could voice just that, another set of spasms hit him and Dr. Owens was wheeling him into a room before he could stop him. Billy heard all the voices suddenly stop. He closed his eyes, begging for it to go away. Not now...please not now.

“Well...as you can see he needs to rest. I would suggest saving most of your questions for when he’s a bit more stable.”

No vocal response. God, why couldn’t someone just say yes so Billy could at least have some idea of who was there? He didn’t want to look up. He didn’t want to deal with this. Please! He silently yelled it in his head. He just wanted to be alone!

“Billy?”

He looked up sharply. Too sharply because his head went dizzy and he had to immediately turn away and puke again.

“Billy...I...I’m glad you’re alive.”

It was just Max. He knew the voice. It was Max! It wasn't...but some part of him wanted it to be him. He wanted his dad there but...after what he'd gotten from Nancy and Eleven he knew that wasn't a possibility. He needed that reassurance right now, that rock, that ability to at least know what to expect.

He didn't have that with Max.

He was completely out of his element and when he finally forced himself to look up, he couldn't help what he knew was an extremely open and fearful look. He sniffed, swallowed and tried to clear out his mouth of the taste of bile and foreign substances.

"Hey...Max." He couldn't think of anything more to say. Nothing biting or scathing or dickish. He just couldn't deal with this. Not now.

He could tell there were people behind her but he forced himself to look elsewhere and...Nancy. Oh god, he'd been so wrapped up in just being alive that he'd forgotten...forgotten that last moment before he'd finally left the dark place. Without hesitating, he carelessly dropped the bucket to the side and wheeled himself towards her.

Reaching out, he clenched his fist before slowly letting go and taking hold of Nancy's forearm. Again, it was...different. It wasn't like the dark place. She was really here. Breathing and alive and so damn pale. She almost matched the color of the sheets.

And now she was alone. It wasn't like he'd had another choice but...he knew what that was like. Just the endless expanse all around.

She'd found him and he'd yelled and argued and just been a god damn nuisance but she'd never left. She'd stayed and even when he'd tried to fight her off she'd just been there. Why? Why had she been kind? There'd been no fucking reason for it but she'd stayed all the same.

And Billy hadn't been able to. He'd left her to fight this thing all alone.

Tears pricked at his eyes. Just...why?

He felt the spasm hit and desperately reached for the bucket. Max

was right by his side and passed it over before Billy threw-up again.

Once finished, he squeezed Nancy's arm once more. He knew she couldn't feel it but...it helped, and he finally looked up to see everyone around him. They...they were all there. Everyone Nancy had mentioned that was in on this whole Upside Down thing. The Chief, a woman he guessed was Jonathan's mom, all the kids-Lucas the little shit-and...Steve, his shirt still damp. How had he cried that much?

He assumed that was his bed on the other side, where everyone was off standing. He just wanted them out. Just get out! But he didn't have the energy to yell so he looked down and mumbled it under his breath. "Leave...just..."

He continued to avoid everyone's gaze, vomited again, and when he finally dared to look up...well he wasn't alone but it was better than having over ten pairs of eyes on him.

"You look like shit," Max said. She was still there, standing by his side. Even Dr. Owens had gone, leaving the room feeling almost empty and vast.

"Thanks for stating the obvious," mumbled Billy. "Get me over to my bed, will you?"

Max let out a sigh and started to push him along. Billy thought back to everything that Nancy had said. A lot of it had been so unimportant while in the moment but now... "Did you really go into tunnels from another dimension and fight off demon dogs?"

"Demodogs, and yeah, I did," Max smugly replied as they got there.

Billy pushed himself up and got onto his bed. His eyes roamed back to Max and...no. All those little brats following Steve fucking Harrington into another dimension? It didn't seem real.

"Fuck...what did I wake up to?" murmured Billy.

"The real world. Which is way weirder just so you know."

"Clearly," Billy sighed. There was a lot he wanted to know, a lot he

wanted to understand but he decided to stick with the safer option.  
“What happened to my leg?”

“Oh, Steve had to do that. Pod people you wouldn’t stop running?”

“Pod people me? What the fuck does that mean? Sounds like a kid came up with it,” groaned Billy.

“Yeah, Dustin did. He’s very proud of it so don’t be an ass,” Max retorted.

“What, they have you kids running the show or something?”

“I’d like to think so. And just so you know, don’t mention anything Upside Down related to the other scientists. Dr. Owens is ok but not outside this room. We’re trying to control what the government knows.”

“What the government...you do realize you’re thirteen right!”

“I’m fourteen. My birthday was two months ago,” Max replied as Billy threw-up again. “That’s seriously gross.”

Billy flicked her off the next moment he could. He really wanted to lie down but what with how his stomach was acting up, he’d just have to sit up again. Instead he pulled himself further onto the bed, crossed one leg and stuck out the one with the cast on it, hands still on the bucket.

“Billy I...Jane told me you didn’t remember hurting Neil.”

Not yet...god he didn’t want to deal with that just yet. He focused on the part that was easier. “Who the hell is Jane?”

“Oh.” Max leaned in and whispered, “Sorry. That’s Eleven’s alias. We have to use it while we’re here.”

“God this is all far too complicated.”

Max shrugged as she leaned back. “Wasn’t it always?”

“No! I had dad, dealt with Susan, and took care of you. It was

simple!”

“How was it simple!” Max yelled. She kept going even as Billy started to puke. “You ignored my mom, you’ve never taken care of me, we’ve only ever just fought, and all your dad does is yell at you and hit you!”

Billy spit and tried to get out, “He’s all I have—”

“Why are you so stupid!” yelled Max. “You always talked about leaving when you turned eighteen. So it’s a few weeks early but so what!? Neil isn’t here and you know he wouldn’t come if he could. Besides, you beat the shit out of him!”

“I didn’t—”

“From his point of view, you did and that’s all that matters,” shot back Max.

Billy rested his head against the rim of the bucket. “He’s all—”

“I’m all you have Billy. Me and all my friends standing out in the hallway,” Max said as she crossed her arms. “It’s either that or you’re all alone. You don’t get another option. I mean...argh! Neil is such an-an-an ass! I don’t understand why you’re trying to argue otherwise!”

“I’m not,” coughed Billy with another spasm.

“Well it’s pretty counterintuitive,” mumbled Max.

“That word’s too big for you.”

Max rolled her eyes. “Whatever.” It was obvious to both of them that they weren’t getting anywhere with this train of thought so she instead asked, “I know what the Doc said about taking it easy on the questions but...how’s Nancy? I know Mike’s really worried about her.”

“Isn’t she dating that Jonathan?”

“Mike’s her brother. Dumbass,” mumbled Max. Billy didn’t feel any

energy to reprimand her. “Well? Is she?”

“Yeah she...she’s stronger than she fucking looks,” Billy got out. “Stronger than me. That’s for damn sure.”

“Not too surprising,” Max muttered. “Can—”

“I don’t want to do questions right now. Not now—” He stopped to puke. “Not when I can barely speak a few words without throwing up.”

Max let out a tired sigh. “Fine. But you’ll need to start talking tomorrow and try to be nice,” she replied. “You wouldn’t be alive if not for these people.”

“Yeah, believe me. I get that.”

Silence passed between them for a moment. It was weird. Billy was sure they’d had longer conversations before but...he felt like this was the first time he’d really talked to his step-sister.

“I need to get home before mom starts to worry,” Max suddenly said, breaking the silence. “I’ve been here all day.”

Back to being alone. It was the last thing Billy wanted but he forced that feeling down and murmured, “Get me some clothes, will you? And grab me my cigarettes.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Max replied. Then as if picking up on his silent worry, she added, “It’s ok, Jonathan won’t leave Nancy’s side, even if you are awake now. Steve also agreed to stay.”

“What?! I—” Why did the puking always get him at the worst times? When he looked up again, Max was already out the door. “Damn it.”

Billy wiped at his mouth and looked back over to Nancy’s still form. His eyes traveled around the room, looked to the window and the woods outside. He’d already had his mental breakdown over accepting the whole ‘we’re not alone’ shit in the dark place but...god he had to get used to being back in the real world. Yet it wasn’t the real world. At least not the one he’d left. Everything was turned around and wrong and there was more to be scared of than just his

dad.

He wanted to just go back to how things were. Before hadn't been good but...it had been Billy's normal. It was so much easier with his world laid out before him, all the corners of the map marked. Now that map was up in flames and gone. His whole path was gone.

He threw-up a few more times before the door opened and this time Jonathan walked in. Billy had never really interacted with Jonathan and most of the information he knew about him was because of Nancy. A lot of thoughts went through Billy's head as he watched him sit down. He certainly knew that if he'd ran into Jonathan at school, he would have said exactly what he was thinking. Probably would have been a bit more creative too since he wouldn't have felt so god damn sick.

But his eyes turned to Nancy before he could say those words. Again, she'd done a lot for him, a lot that she hadn't needed to. It was a large debt that Billy didn't like owing so he started to repay it back with just a few words. "She's ok. She's strong and she'll make it," Billy got out right before he puked.

Jonathan just gave him a stiff nod as Billy focused on the bucket. After a while, another doctor came in and took it, giving him another one. As he left, Steve came in and nodded towards Jonathan, hesitating as his eyes came over to Billy. He didn't walk over, instead shoving his hands into his pockets.

"I'm just here because of Max. And because Nancy doesn't seem to despise you though god knows why."

Billy just shot him a scowl though apparently Steve took that as a sign to walk over. As he sat down, Billy grabbed him by the hem of his shirt. Steve could have easily broken out of it, Billy wasn't exactly at his peak strength, but Steve just sat down, clearly more curious than frightened by what was about to happen. Who could possibly be scared of Billy in this state?

"You tell them about...about it and I'll kill you. Got it."

"Yeah, yeah, already said I just spilled some damn water on myself,"

mumbled Steve as he leaned away. “Just telling you though, Jonathan did see everything so lying in front of him isn’t going to really help.”

Billy started to growl something out but he started puking instead.

“Dr. Owens said it shouldn’t be much longer before that starts to subside,” Steve said, pity showing up on his face.

It was the last thing Billy really wanted but he didn’t have the energy to fight. He didn’t want to be asked questions, didn’t want to have to talk about the dark place so soon after everything, but he also didn’t want to sit there puking while Steve Harrington just stared at him in silence. He decided to fill in some of the missing pieces to the whole story that Nancy hadn’t been able to answer.

“How the hell did you get to the tunnels after I put you on the ground?” asked Billy.

Steve snorted. “Max drove. And let me tell you, Demogorgon, demodogs, Mind Flayer, all of it was nothing compared to waking up and finding a thirteen year old in the driver’s seat.”

Billy gaped.

“Yeah, that was basically me,” Steve sighed. “So, how’s it feel knowing we live in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*?”

“The kind of pain that only comes with throwing up every goddamn organ in your body,” growled Billy.

“Fair enough analogy. Except of course...you’re doing it right now.”

“Shut it Harring—” He puked.

“Sorry, you’re going to have to speak up.”

Billy spit out a small piece of root. “Fuck you.”

“Whatever,” Steve shrugged. “You need anything? Again, don’t want to give the wrong impression but I’m just doing this for Max.”



Billy tried to say ‘for you to go fuck yourself’ but he barely got out the first word and when he was able to clear his throat, he just shook his head and muttered, “Nothing. Not now.”

Steve just nodded and Billy focused more on the bucket and the mixture of black and white sludge in it.

That’s all he could really do as the minutes went by and finally it felt like he wasn’t throwing up as often as before. He was so tired that he finally just fell back, damn the puking. He lied against his pillow with the wound from the surgery facing upwards. It meant he had to look towards Nancy and Steve and Jonathan but he didn’t really care. He was just...he was so tired.

Steve positioned the bucket so all Billy had to do was lean over and puke every time a spasm hit him. Finally to just...sleep. After so many months of endless nothingness he could just...sleep...

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A part of Max still couldn’t believe Billy had made it. Considering the odds stacked against him, she’d just tried to cope with the entire situation by assuming the worst and yet...it hadn’t come.

It was a relief. A huge relief because she didn’t have to blame herself for not seeing it sooner. It didn’t matter because he was alive. But at the same time...god things were ten times more complicated. She’d felt it in their short conversation. Billy was different. Not only that but what with all the thinking Max had been doing, she felt like she also understood Billy better than the past year they’d officially been step-siblings.

But what did that mean for the next day? The next week? Would things revert back to their old dynamics? Max sure as hell wouldn’t let that happen but would Billy try to ignore everything that had changed? Hide from the truth and just be a dick like he always was? It was a possibility that Max realized she’d have to be on the lookout for in order to stop it from cementing. She didn’t know what Billy could become now, exactly how drastic he had changed and what could be learned from him, but she didn’t want all that chance to just up and disappear.

She still didn't like him but as much as she loved her friends and even Steve and Nancy and Jonathan and the grownups, none of them could really understand what it was like living in that awful house dealing with Neil and her mom. No one understood the drastic change of moving from California to this tiny little town in the middle of nowhere. No one understood what it was like being told 'you have a sibling and there's nothing you can do about it'. No one except Billy. Now that there was a possibility they could do more than just fight...that perhaps this scary situation could bring them together...Max realized she wanted just that. She wanted to fight for that and understand why Billy was how he was and see how much he could change.

And so even though their first conversation after him getting out of the dark place hadn't been smooth, she did count it as a success.

She also followed through with her promise the moment she got home, sneaking into his room with her empty book bag and grabbing what she could find. She made a face going through his dresser drawers but she figured it was better to grab everything that he'd need so he didn't moan about it later.

As she figured out how much of each thing she needed to bring, she figured he technically only needed one sock and shoe considering the cast but she grabbed both anyways, unsure of how long he'd be at the Lab. Overall though, looking for pants was the most annoying thing. None of them were big enough to get over the cast so she ended up finding all his gym shorts and shoved them into the bag instead. With a final, satisfied sigh, she grabbed a pack of cigarettes still on Billy's desk and zipped the bag up and threw it over her shoulder, ready to leave just as the door opened.

Max froze in her spot. It was like everything in her had just stopped as she watched Neil step in. He'd healed up quite a bit since the incident and it didn't look like there would be any permanent damage. Most of the bruising was completely gone with only a little yellow here and there and all the cuts having scabbed over. It was an odd in between though, especially in this moment.

His face wasn't bad enough for her to feel pity for him but it wasn't healed enough for her to think of him as she had before. The scars

made him look dangerous almost. And seeing as he'd just caught her doing something she shouldn't be doing, it made the situation all the more tense.

"Maxine, when did you get home?"

"Just now." She barely finished saying that when Neil went right into his next line of questioning.

"Why are you in here?"

"I...I don't know. I just...sometimes it feels like he should be here but he isn't. It's weird." She was thankful that the book bag was already zipped up. How the hell would she have explained to Neil why she was taking a bunch of Billy's clothes?

"Well I don't want you coming in here anymore. I should have the entire room trashed. I actually will when I find the time," Neil said. "You're not allowed to come in here and you're to make sure your mother and I know when you're out and when you'll be home. Understood?"

Max nodded and tried to hurry out of the room. She was ready to get out of this situation as quickly as possible but before she could get past him he grabbed her. The grip was harsh and painful, fingers digging into her shoulder.

"I asked if you understood Maxine. When I ask something, I expect an answer. Now answer me. Do you understand?"

He didn't raise his voice but his tone was harsh and cruel. It left no room for argument. It was the same tone of voice she'd always heard him use on Billy.

Max mutely nodded as she tried not to tremble, desperate to get back to her room before she quickly remembered what he wanted and got out, "Yes sir."

"Good. Now get on to bed. It's late."

She mumbled out another 'yes sir' as she forced her feet to move slowly and steadily rather than the panicked run she wanted to do.

Once in her room, she shut the door carefully and fell against it with an exhausted sigh. She couldn't believe she was thinking this, but she couldn't wait to go back to the Lab tomorrow.

## 5. Break

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you to everyone who has stuck around for this story and for new comers too! We're officially half way through this and I'm so happy with how it's turning out so far. This chapter has a lot of scenes that I thought up before I even had a definitive story line planned out so it felt great finally writing them down. Anyways, thanks for all the comments and kudos and I hope you enjoy. Thanks!

Hospital or not, Billy decided he really hated Hawkins Lab. He hated how empty and cold it was, the fact that it was in the middle of nowhere and he couldn't leave whenever he wanted to. All he could do was talk and listen, and he wasn't really the best at either of those. Still, over the next few days he got bits and pieces of the overall story from multiple sources, some adding on to what Nancy had told him about the past Upside Down experiences and others talking about what was happening now.

Some things were crazier and clearly more unbelievable but for the most part, Billy just accepted it all because that was all he could do. The only words that were difficult to listen to were Max's on the third day after he'd woken up.

At that point, he was still throwing-up but only about once every two hours. What Max ended up telling him...he would rather take back those first few hours and deal with throwing-up every few minutes. He was more afraid of listening about this than facing a Demogorgon or whatever it was called.

The fear stemmed from the simple fact that she told him.

It wasn't just a quick word or phrase like everyone else had been doing. Max gave him details. Details that made his heart clench and his mind swim. He still couldn't remember it, not one hit or blow. But if that had been him, if some part of himself had broken through for a split second, he understood his words. Of course he would scream

at her to run. All he could think was...he'd become him. He was his father. The thing he feared and loved and the only one he could count on.

He couldn't let Max become him. He couldn't have their places switch. He'd needed her to run, to get out of there before something worse happened.

That's what Billy thought but that wasn't what he said. He just murmured, "He'll kill me." Even now it was easier focusing on his dad than Max. His dad was his rock. It didn't matter what was good or bad. He knew what to expect.

"Yeah, he's been telling people that," replied Max. She bit her bottom lip. "He doesn't...really mean that though. Right? He's your dad."

"My dad has never said anything he didn't mean," retorted Billy. "Christ...I just need to leave."

"You can't—"

"Even Dr. Owens has said I've been getting better faster than he expected! I just want to leave this damn town and never return."

"You can't!" repeated Max. "Don't be stupid. What if you relapsed or something else happened? It's not like you can just go to some other hospital."

"I just don't want to be here," hissed Billy. "It's almost as bad as the dark place."

Max rolled her eyes, sarcasm dripping from her voice. "Is it really?"

"...no," Billy reluctantly growled out.

"That's what I thought. Just stop being so whiny. You don't have another choice so there's no point in thinking about what-ifs."

"Shut up. You don't know what you're talking about."

"What? Because I'm a kid?"

“You just don’t understand!”

“Maybe I understand more than you think!”

“Like fucking what!? Get out! Get out!”

Max stuck out her tongue and flicked him off, leaving without saying another word.

That entire conversation was the hardest thing to face and Billy wasn’t even sure if he had fully dealt with it. But the days after it were easier at least. After the sixth day the throwing-up had even stopped and Dr. Owens confirmed that all foreign substances had passed out of his body. Of course, after the relief of that statement, he’d gotten a bit angry as he’d demanded he be allowed to leave but of course nothing came of it.

Eventually he took the bandage off his head and got a good look at the surgical scar. He’d had brain surgery...god what a weird thing to think. His hair was already growing a bit and he’d been told the staples could be removed in another week. It didn’t look great but... well sometimes it was just easier focusing on the material things than all the crazy.

But when he did face the weird and the crazy, he got a chance to talk with Eleven a bit more. Or he supposed Jane now. It was all too complicated. But he did talk with her in regards to Nancy and passed on a few comforting words here and there.

Billy hadn’t realized how hard it was for Jane, going back and forth constantly. He just never noticed the fatigue in the dark place but he could see it now. It was difficult not to be impressed, watching her go back and forth without question, determined to see Nancy as often as possible as she wiped the blood from her nose.

She wasn’t always at the Lab and Billy came to understand that she could visit people no matter where she was. However, once the doctors and scientists started to get some proper drug cocktails made, they had Jane there more often to get information directly to Nancy and back again. Apparently they’d made some rather impressive strides but not with anything that would be safe for a human to take.

They had to destroy the fungus without hurting Nancy after all.

And as the days passed, Billy understood the quarantine was extended much to the town's anger leading to no shortage of issues for Chief Hopper. All of this was so complicated and Billy had no idea how long it would take. But after the first week, he knew he couldn't stay a whole month. The same went for the second week only now he couldn't hide his panic and irritation. Too many days were spent waking up and thinking...thinking he was back there. He just couldn't do it!

He'd exploded forth with that feeling on Dr. Owens and both he and Jonathan had left Billy to sit and stew. Not after the dark place. He couldn't deal with this now. He couldn't—

“Hey kid.”

Billy looked up, surprised at the appearance of Chief Hopper. He hadn't really had a one on one talk with the man and it felt odd being alone with him.

“What? You come down to tell me off? That the good old doctor knows best?” growled Billy.

“He's right.”

God, so fucking blunt. Still, it was better than him dancing around the subject. “I just...I can't stay here.”

Hopper ran a hand through his hair. “I know.”

“No! You don't know! People...people keep telling me they understand but they don't fucking understand! Why can't you people fucking get that!”

Billy hoped Hopper would leave. Just give up! He didn't fucking need people to stick around when all they did was talk shit and argue. They didn't have a right to argue when they didn't even understand. Fuck the Chief just like everyone else. He didn't get it.

“I've seen your records Billy. I know what he did to you.”



For just a split second, confusion passed through Billy. Hopper couldn't know the full story? Could he? But any questions that it brought up he squelched just as quickly. "Big whoop. So did my teacher. My neighbor. Doesn't make you special."

"Hold on. You-you're saying people—"

"Well yeah! Hard not to ignore how the thirteen year old suddenly has a black eye and a cast on his arm!" Billy yelled back. "Of course people fucking knew. They asked my dad."

Hopper sighed. Why did he look sad? Why sorrowful? It didn't make fucking sense. "What did he tell them Billy? That you fell down some stairs or—"

"What? No! He fucking beat me for being a fag! Alright!? Go on, fucking laugh or agree." Billy hadn't meant to just come out and say it but he was tired and stressed. And who really cared? He knew the reaction he would get. Everyone who'd been told the truth had acted the same way. Any sorrow they'd felt for Billy went out the window the moment his dad talked honestly and then it was all "good, set him straight" and "put him on the right track". He looked at Hopper and waited for that familiar look of disgust. God, why couldn't he hurry up and get it over with?

"Billy I...I can't say I...understand. But I know that no matter what, it's never right for a father to beat his son within an inch of his life."

Billy...laughed. He had to. His father had every right. It was why Billy hated him. Why he loved him. Why he wanted to run in the opposite direction and yet put up with each slap and yelled word. He'd just dealt with it and understood he didn't have another choice. All he had was his dad.

Yet the way the Chief was looking at him...

"Stop it," Billy murmured. It was soft. Uncertain. Hopper's face didn't change. "I said stop it! Stop fucking looking at me like that!"

"Alright Billy, sorry. I don't mean anything by it." Hopper was looking away now but his tone...there was still pity in that. He didn't

want pity! No one had given him pity before and he didn't want it now! But before he could say that, Hopper said, "The quarantine is still in effect and even if it wasn't, you need to stay near simply so you can get to the Doc in a moment's notice if something were to happen. But I get why you hate the hospital feel. I...I have a place that you can go. You'd basically be under house arrest but it wouldn't be a hospital."

Billy still didn't understand why his admittance hadn't changed things, why Hopper hadn't left already. He didn't understand so he focused on the out Hopper was giving him and ignored the questions it left behind. "Fine. Whatever. Just get me out of this fucking place."

"Ok. In that case...you'll be staying with Steve Harrington."

"You're fucking with me."

Hopper let out another tired sigh. "I am not."

"You...Steve. He...you do know what happened between us right!"

"I do. But he has the room, his parents are gone, it's the best choice we have for the moment. Besides, it'll be the last place your father will look for you."

"I don't—"

"Billy, I understand you want to leave so just take the chance. Otherwise you could be here for another two to three weeks," Hopper interrupted. He stood up with another sigh. "I'll come back later, give you time to think."

He left without another word and Billy...he didn't know what to feel. He expected to get at least a bit more time to himself but before he knew it, Jonathan was already back in the room. He was always there, always by Nancy's side. Billy could understand, it was his girlfriend and whatever, but why couldn't he be gone for just a little fucking longer?

"I'm guessing Hopper gave you the choice?" questioned Jonathan, immediately picking up on Billy's bad mood.

“What? Have you lot been colluding out there?” growled Billy. “Fuck, yes he told me! It’s bat shit insane!”

“It is pretty ridiculous. Even by these standards but...you’re going to say yes. Aren’t you?”

“Why the hell would I say yes? I’m not shacking up with Harrington!”

“So despite all those times you’ve flipped on the doctors...you’re willing to stay here longer?”

Billy glowered. This was why he fucking hated Jonathan. So often he was quiet like a ghost or a cat or some shit but then he’d spout out something that was right on point. Billy couldn’t respond to it because his dislike of hospitals definitely outweighed anything else, even dealing with Steve and all the shit that had happened between them.

He’d been stuck in the dark place so long and the last thing he wanted was being reminded of the other darkest point in his life. He wanted out. He needed to get out and now...Steve Harrington was that lifeline. It was wrong, Billy knew that, but then everything was wrong now. He’d already accepted there was no way to fight it. So why try and fight this too?

“Please don’t kill him,” Jonathan suddenly said, voice so flat that it was impossible to tell if he was joking.

Billy rolled his eyes. “High school’s over. Got worse things to deal with now. Though I could still fucking take him anyways.”

“Really? At least wait until the cast is off.”

“I could just kick him with it.”

Jonathan let out a tired sigh. “Please don’t.”

“Christ, it was a fucking joke. I won’t...probably won’t anyways.”

“So then you are going?”

Billy groaned, placing his head in his hands. “I don’t have another

choice.”

Jonathan shrugged. “I suppose you don’t. Good luck I guess.”

Billy looked over and stared for just a moment, wondering if Jonathan meant the words or not. Billy decided he wouldn’t respond either way and simply turned to stare ahead at the wall, wondering what could go wrong next.

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“Why me!” exclaimed Steve. He looked at Hopper with a glare. “Why can’t you—”

“There’s no room and if I just take everyone there then that just heightens the chance of someone else following us one day,” hissed Hopper. He leaned back and added, “Your home is completely empty anyways and doing this will be easier on everyone.”

“Not me,” groaned Steve.

He argued back and forth with Hopper, Jonathan choosing no side, but eventually Steve stopped, knowing he’d give in. He hadn’t really talked to Billy since the day he woke up and actually being alone with him probably wouldn’t mean anything good but...he knew how difficult being here had been for the guy. Not only that but he knew there was something more to this going by what Hopper would and wouldn’t say. After all, it had been his idea to help him.

So Steve did cave and the information was slowly passed around. He was repeatedly asked ‘are you insane’ by multiple kids, especially Dustin. His only response to that was ‘possibly’ because how much could he hate himself to agree to this?

But he had and miracle of miracles, Billy for whatever reason agreed too.

And that was how Steve ended up sitting in his car with Billy in the passenger’s seat. Billy was holding a bag with what few things Max had taken from their home while the step-siblings said their goodbyes since Joyce was taking Max back. The goodbye definitely wasn’t heartfelt but Steve could tell things had changed with them. Judging

by both their personalities, he was pretty sure he'd be attacked if he pointed that out to either of them so he waited in silence, watching Max leave with her middle finger up. Billy mimicked it and then turned around.

"Well come on Harrington. Don't just sit there."

Steve resisted the urge to groan. If he started he suspected he wouldn't stop so he stayed silent and pulled out of the parking lot at Hawkins Lab instead.

It was night now as he drove back and not once did Billy speak up. Steve wondered if this was what the next few days would be, complete silence. He supposed it was better than the chance of Billy getting angry out of nowhere but the silence was just as weird.

Steve was pretty damn thankful once he parked in the garage and could get out to properly breathe. He glanced over to Billy who was already beginning to look over the place with a critical eye as he held his bag close to his side. Considering what his own home life was like, Steve wouldn't be surprised if Billy's first annoyance turned out to be the size of his house, his parents' income, or something unfixable like that. It seemed to be Billy's MO: focus on pointless things and get angry for no reason instead of talking about anything useful.

"We've got a spare room upstairs or you can camp out on the couch," Steve tried. "Whichever would be easier for your leg."

"After spending nights on that shit bed I am not sleeping on the couch."

"Ok, ok," sighed Steve. "Do you want something to eat? Drink?"

Billy scowled as if that question was somehow a crime as they walked into the house. Again, his eyes just looked around, scanning the large staircase and the open living room. Steve thought about asking again but decided to hell with it and headed towards the kitchen by himself. He'd barely been home and when he was, he'd mostly just come back to sleep or grab spare clothes. Because of that, he wasn't surprised at the lack of food, the spoiled milk or moldy bread.

Steve let out an annoyed sigh, looking further into the fridge for just anything. He'd have to go grocery shopping soon. The thought just made him feel old and he pulled out a thing of grape juice and finally found one thing of crackers.

"For a house this big I didn't expect your parents to starve you."

Steve rolled his eyes at Billy's entrance. "They're gone, remember? And I've been at Hawkins Lab more than I've been here for the past few weeks."

Billy just shrugged and was gone again.

After Steve downed a glass and shoved some store brand crap into his mouth, he found Billy in the living room, just limping around on his cast and eyes going over pictures and books and pointless bobbles Steve's parents had gotten from one trip or another.

"You were made to be King Steve," Billy muttered sarcastically. "All the fucking opportunities in the world and good looks too. But then a Demogorgon fell in your lap."

Steve wanted to be mad with Billy's insensitivity. That entire situation had been traumatic as all hell, but... "Yeah, that's basically accurate," he reluctantly sighed. "Let's be honest. You said it best that one time. I ruled the school and I could get anything I wanted." He laughed suddenly, the stupidity of it all really falling on him now that it was all behind him. He voiced just that. "Seems pointless looking back on it. I was a pretty big jerk and...really for no reason at all. I guess I should thank the Demogorgon for putting my head on straight at least. Realizing the world wasn't mine would have been a much ruder awakening after graduation without it."

An odd look came across Billy's face as he looked back over. "Did I graduate?"

"Uh...you weren't at the ceremony but I think you technically did."

Billy didn't respond, just let out a long sigh and muttered, "God I'm tired."

"Well hold on a second. I need to make the bed upstairs."

"I'm fine with just a mattress."

"No way! I'm going to put down the damn sheets first."

"You really are a mom," snorted Billy.

Steve groaned. "You've been listening to Dustin haven't you?"

"Hard not to. I swear that kid doesn't know how to shut up." Billy laughed again. "Mom Steve. Heh, that can be your new title."

"Don't you dare say that around the kids! They'll start chanting it before you know it."

Billy laughed again, not cruel or mean but just honestly amused. It... was a nice sight. Steve rolled his eyes and headed up the stairs. As he grabbed the sheets and started to make up the spare room, he thought about Billy in a way that he'd never bothered to ponder. He'd seen parts of Billy that he hadn't known to exist, some of which he was sure Billy would have preferred to stay buried.

Steve could sort of understand now. He didn't have all the answers but it was clear that for the most part, Billy did everything to protect himself. It was his only option. At least that's what he'd been taught. Put on the mask, hide everything that wasn't useful when it came to pushing people away. It was probably why his anger was so often his go-to emotion. It helped to distance people, got him out of situations and allowed him to rationalize his actions. It sure as hell wasn't healthy but it at least made more sense than just pointless anger.

Steve still wondered about Lucas and how that tied to Billy. In the hospital Billy had just ignored the kid which was probably the equivalent of civility for him. There were a few connections that certainly could be made as to why Billy hated him but none of the assumptions Steve came up with felt right. There wasn't much evidence for any of it either and Steve didn't want to wrongly label Billy, especially not now.

Other than Lucas though, Billy had basically been standoffish and kind of a dick to everyone. Not to the same degree as usual but it wasn't like his personality had done a one-eighty. But there was

definitely a lot more understanding behind his eyes when he was listening to someone and there was some kindness here and there that shocked everyone.

Steve had especially been surprised in his dealings with Jane. Considering what she'd told them about Billy in the dark place, Steve had figured his irritation and annoyance directed at her would follow him out of there. However, when he first wanted to get a message to Nancy he didn't push it. He didn't yell at Jane to do it or demand it like he did with almost everything else. Just a soft, careful question of if she would. And when she said yes and had gone through with it, he even patted her on the shoulder and muttered, "Thanks kid."

And speaking of Nancy, Billy's want to make sure she was alright was a surprise too. Steve wanted to ask about what had happened in the dark place but whereas Nancy and Jane seemed to bring out a kinder side in him, any mention of the dark place made Billy doubly angry. When Dr. Owens had tried to get some information about the place, Billy's go-to response was "Go fuck yourself."

Steve was sure he'd get the same response if he asked so he decided he'd wait for Nancy to wake up to get his answers.

With that, he finished doing up the bed and walked out of the room to find Billy had made it up the stairs. He was leaning against a wall with a photo in hand. He'd taken it off the opposite wall, the paler square clearly showing against the darker color.

"Laugh it off," sighed Steve. "I know. I've always had a head full of hair. Everyone does."

Billy did laugh but the noise wasn't really malicious. "You're lucky," he muttered.

"Lucky? I've been begging my parents to take it down! I think everyone's laughed at it on the way up. Even Nancy!" snorted Steve. He expected Billy to laugh again, make some crass comment about that last admittance that Steve hadn't meant to give.

Instead a frown twitched at his lips. He put the picture back. "I don't have any baby pictures." It was said under his breath, almost as an



afterthought like he hadn't meant to say it out loud. Before Steve could say anything though, Billy was already moving into the spare room. He looked around before leaning against the window. The blinds were up, allowing them to see into Steve's backyard.

"It's summer. Why the hell don't you have water in that? If I had a pool like that, I sure as hell would use it," muttered Billy.

"Oh...uh...I haven't used it since. Well since—"

"Oh yeah. That chick died here or something, right?"

Steve rubbed his eyes tiredly. "Her name was Barb. She was Nancy's best friend so have some respect."

"Shit, sorry. I forgot she mentioned that." Billy's eyes went over the backyard once more before— "What? Stop looking at me like I grew a second fucking head! What with the shit I know now, for all I know I could be!"

Steve just stared as Billy dramatically slapped his neck checking for that second head. To think there'd be a point in Steve's life where Billy actually said sorry to him. It was just unthinkable. It wasn't sarcastic or meant to be cruel. The word had been utterly genuine. "I just uh...zoned out."

"You are shit at lying Steve Harrington."

"So I've been told," sighed Steve. Hoping Billy would forget about that, he added, "Listen, bathroom is right over there, my room is next door if you ever need me. Obviously you're welcomed to the kitchen but I need to actually go shopping first. Hmm...I should make a grocery list."

"Such a mom."

"Please no."

"Ha! It's your own damn fault," grinned Billy. He dropped his bag of clothes by the bed and sat down. "So, just give it to me, this is going to be boring as shit and seeing as you don't want to fill up the damn pool, there's jack all to do. Huh?"

“I have a TV—”

“I was in the living room. I saw. I’m not blind,” snorted Billy.

“Books—”

“No thanks.”

“Urgh! You want me to go buy you something to play with?” grumbled Steve.

“Hey, if push comes to shove, I can always play with myself.”

“My room is right next to yours!”

Billy stuck out his tongue in that completely lewd way he seemed to always enjoy doing before saying, “I know.”

“You’re insufferable! I’m going to bed!”

“Ah, mom have a tough day at work?”

“Goodnight Billy!”

Stomping out, Steve slammed the door to his room just a little too hard and fell back onto his bed. God this was going to be a long... week? Month?! God, he didn’t think he could survive that.

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Max hadn’t meant to spend so long at the Lab that day but Hopper giving in to Billy’s demands had thrown everyone off. Max was still angry at Hopper for refusing to tell her what had originally caught his eye in Billy’s records but she suspected it had something to do with his actions now.

“We’re never going to see him again,” Dustin mournfully said in regard to Steve. “When should we hold the funeral?”

Everyone groaned as Dustin had been going on about that for ages. Of course, all the kids silently agreed, even if they vocalized how stupid it all was and that Dustin was overreacting. Max couldn’t believe that either of them were agreeing to it but there wasn’t

anything she could do now.

When it came to finally seeing Billy off, it was surreal, seeing him and Steve sitting in a car and not strangling each other. She focused on Billy, giving him an annoyed goodbye. “Don’t try and run. Doc will need to see you again.”

“I’ve got a cast on my leg moron. How the hell would I run?”

“I don’t know! You’re the kind of idiot who would try to do it.”

“Yeah, well fuck you.”

Max flicked him off and Billy mimicked her as she marched over to Ms. Byers’ car.

“Glad to see he’s his usual cheerful self,” muttered Lucas. “I was starting to worry he was getting sick.”

Max rolled her eyes and got in, Ms. Byers quickly driving all the kids around town to their respective homes. As Max walked up to her house, she thought about sneaking into her room but she knew that Neil would check it eventually and the punishment for coming home so late would probably be even worse. Because of that, she decided it was best to just face the fire head on rather than pushing it away for later.

In the past weeks he’d become more controlling, always on her about what was and wasn’t proper behavior. She’d only asked her mom about it once, her reply being that he was just being a good father figure. It didn’t fool Max but she didn’t argue further with her mother and decided to deal with Neil as-is rather than making it worse.

Neil was sitting on the couch as Max walked in and he was up immediately just like she expected. Her mom was nowhere to be found and Max steeled herself for the confrontation. She thought back to Billy and how his fights with his dad always deescalated faster when Billy just agreed and said “yes sir”. So far it seemed that was a pretty safe template to go by.

“You’re not home at the time we agreed Max. It’s nearly eight,” Neil said. His tone wasn’t concerned in the slightest.

"I know sir. It was my mistake. I'm sorry," Max quickly said. She wanted to look elsewhere but she made sure to keep her head high and her shoulders back. She had to be polite but she couldn't show weakness either. For the moment they were at a truce but if she acted cowardly, she felt for sure Neil would pounce.

"Are you really?"

"It won't happen again sir."

"Do you understand what you're promising? Do you understand what happens if you break a promise?"

"Yes sir," Max responded, forcing her voice to remain as calm as possible.

For a moment, they just stared at each other and as each second ticked by, Max could feel the hair on the back of her neck rising. She'd gone by the script. What else could she say? It had to be enough. It had to—

"No dinner tonight. I expect you to be honest about how late you'll be out next time. Hurry on to bed."

"Yes sir," Max said, forcing her feet not to rush as she left for her room.

With another confrontation dealt with, she let out her scared breath and relaxed in her room. Since it was summer and she didn't have to worry about homework, she went straight to bed in the hopes of waking up earlier and being able to get out as quickly as possible.

Now with Billy back from the dark place, Max felt like she could go out and actually enjoy herself. Even if the town was still in quarantine, it was a lot easier than before, just being normal kids and messing around. Now she could go back to being annoyed by Billy and hating him, though maybe not as much as before. At least now her mind was clear of any worry she'd felt.

There was still of course Nancy but they'd grabbed her right when the infection had happened and her chances were far greater than Billy's. Time wasn't even a problem at least not yet. They just needed

to find a safer way of eradicating this thing that could be spread throughout the population to further get rid of the fungus and parasites from any hosts that might have been taken since its first appearance.

However, Max wasn't really worried about that now, not like with the Mind Flayer anyways. There just wasn't that overwhelming sense of panic of that idea of something worse on the way. This was simply a hiccup of oddness in the overall strangeness that was Hawkins.

The next day Max made sure to be very specific about what time she'd be home and went off to the junkyard with Lucas right after breakfast. They planned to meet everyone at the arcade and then Ms. Byers was to pick them up and take them to the Lab to check on Nancy and Jane. For now though, Max stayed in the moment.

For the first time in a while, Max actually listened to Lucas complaining about his little sister and things that had been going on in his family. She'd of course listened before, but it had never gotten her full attention. Now they laughed more and talked about their planned classes for next year and the hope of them all being in at least one of the same classes and the shame that they couldn't have Mr. Clarke as a teacher again. Max hadn't even known him for a full year, and science wasn't really her subject, but she couldn't not like him.

Still, the strangeness that was apparently now a permanent resident of Hawkins couldn't stay out of their conversation forever.

"You know Mike is having a hell of a time explaining to his mom why Nancy would still be on a camping trip after three weeks. She's starting to get really suspicious," said Lucas.

"So now they're taking an interest in where their kids are. Great," Max muttered sarcastically. "If they don't find a way to get rid of that fungus and wake up Nancy soon, things are just going to get worse. I mean, how long can they hide all this?"

Lucas shrugged. "Well no one will ever know its origins. No one would believe them. They'd think they were just a bunch of crackpot scientists, not proper government officials then. They'll come up with

something easier to believe if the quarantine really does have to continue further.”

“Well, on the plus side Dustin’s mom cancelled the trip.”

Lucas nodded in agreement, his eyes lighting up as he clearly remembered something. Max looked on curiously as he pulled his book bag around and opened it up.

“Listen, it’s from—I mean it’s really from all of us but it was uh...it was my idea since we kind of...well you know said—”

Max rolled her eyes. “Just hurry up stalker.”

“Right...well...here.”

She looked at the badly wrapped rectangle. As she took it rather carelessly, Lucas freaked just a bit. “Careful!”

“Ok, ok. You could have told me that first,” snorted Max. She held it more gently and carefully took off the brown wrapping. Underneath was... “Lucas! You guys...you seriously...but this doesn’t look like the ones you have.”

“Upgrading,” grinned Lucas. “And we knew it was only fair that you got your own too. I know you were going to get your mom to buy it or whatever when we were trying to plan things out but I figured... well I saved some pocket change and-the others obviously helped!-but—”

“No! This is amazing!” Max grinned as she looked at the walkie-talkie. “Sucks that I don’t live closer to one of you but this...” She trailed off, not wanting to really say the words because she knew what Lucas’ responsive would be. She was already their friend and all that stuff and she didn’t need to prove herself in any way. However, Max couldn’t help but smile. Now she really felt like a part of the group. “It’s really great. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Lucas shyly murmured.

From there, the next few days went great. Max tried out the walkie-talkie every chance she got, excited to finally have one. She hid it

from her mom and Neil though, not wanting either to question where it was from. After all, neither were really a part of her life and there was no reason for them to get interested now.

She continued to go to the Lab pretty often and every time Steve was there she asked after Billy. It was pretty surprising that neither of them had buried the other in the backyard but she supposed it helped what with how often Steve was at the Lab rather than home.

“My damn living room smells like smoke now,” grumbled Steve. “Made me go buy his damn cigarettes when I went to the grocery store. Who does he think he is?”

“Wait. You went grocery shopping?” asked Dustin.

A fairly wicked grin came on Max’s face, much like everyone else’s as Steve shook his head.

“No that’s—”

“Mom Steve!” shouted Dustin.

Max laughed. “Mom Steve!” she agreed.

All the kids chanted it as they followed him down the hallway to Nancy’s room, a scientist passing them with an extremely confused glance.

Besides visiting Nancy, Max also went to the cabin to hang out with Jane on one occasion. Hopper figured she needed another break from the Lab and Max was only too happy to distract her. Outside the Lab, Max kept calling her Jane since she would have to use it once her cover was officially out and Hopper could announce he’d adopted her anyways. Max also suspected she was happier with the name Jane, the meaning behind Eleven being rather traumatic. Max was only too happy to help her with the change of name and it was nice getting to spend time with her. They played board games and watched far too much TV and though they didn’t have a great amount of space, Max started to teach Jane how to balance on the skateboard and move forward.

She fell twice but Max caught her both times, though on the second

fall they both crashed onto the couch leading them into a fit of giggles. It was a good moment as they got to act as just kids.

Besides the Lab, Max spent her time around town that week avoiding her mom and Neil. She continued to go to the arcade, explored some new places that Mike and the others had yet to show her, and was finally invited into Will's fort near his house. He claimed you were never too old to have a fort and Max had to agree when it was as awesome as the one Will had.

The week went by with plenty of laughs and smiles. Billy clearly didn't strangle Steve since she saw Steve nearly every day (and she trusted Steve not to do the same), progress was made towards Nancy's recovery, and she now had her own walkie-talkie. Max even succeeded in grabbing a few more of Billy's things and passed them onto Steve, figuring Billy would want them since it seemed Neil really was going to throw everything out. Steve told her Billy was thankful for it though she had no way of knowing if Billy had actually said that or if it was just Steve's interpretation. Either way, for a moment despite the extremely abnormal situation, Max felt more normal than she had in a while. Things were good.

But they couldn't stay that way forever.

She'd nearly forgotten but her life was a constant loop of good until it wasn't and it always wasn't when she went home.

There was no way she could understand the change that was about to happen, too wrapped up in her week long good mood. She was home ten minutes earlier than she'd told Neil and there wasn't a problem in her head as she walked through the front door with her skateboard in hand. Neil had been sitting on the porch when Ms. Byers dropped her off and now followed her inside without a word.

Max wasn't really thinking about it or the fact that all her friends had still been in the car as she headed off to her room. Considering that Neil didn't say anything else, she figured she was in the clear. She put her book bag on her bed. Since it was summer, it was filled to the brim with what she considered necessities, the walkie-talkie, a slingshot, a list of numbers to Hopper, Ms. Byers, Steve, and her friends' home numbers, and snacks. The guys usually carried around



similar items, their survival bags as they called them considering you could never be too careful what with all the strangeness that seemed to happen in the area. She'd have to restock on the snacks but there was otherwise no reason to empty it. With that decided, she grabbed her towel from her closet and her shampoo and conditioner. The bathroom was too small and overcrowded to put her stuff there considering it was shared by three people since her mom and Neil's was having plumbing issues.

She walked towards her door but before she could open it, the door flew open and she fell back on her butt. Her bathroom supplies scattered across the floor as she looked up. "What—"

"I thought you were better than that shit son of mine but here I see you hanging out with their kind!"

Max tried to scramble up and away but Neil grabbed hold of her shirt and pulled her onto her feet before she could. Fear flashed through her as she tried to get out the words, "You're hurting me!" but Neil just talked over her.

"I figured you had enough sense that we didn't need to watch you as closely but clearly I was wrong," growled Neil.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Max yelled back just as he hit her hard in the cheek.

"Don't know? You're hanging out with that kind of kid like he has a right to be around white people. You've got to put them in their place or before you know it, they think they're just as good."

"He's my friend—!" Max recoiled from the hard shake as fear gripped her and she listened to the horrible words that spewed out of Neil's mouth, slurs that she'd been taught not to use and made her eyes go wide.

"From this moment on you have no friends! You will not associate with people like that. Do you understand Maxine?"

"Screw you!"

In seconds, Max felt herself being lifted up and slammed against a

wall. Her head spun for a split second and she almost yelled out for her mom. She could have sworn she saw her car in the driveway. Didn't she hear any of this? Maybe she honestly didn't but what kept Max from yelling was the chilling memory of watching her mom simply stand by as Neil beat Billy. She'd just watched, never done anything, and Max wanted to believe she wouldn't act the same way towards her own daughter. Max wanted to believe her mom would come if she yelled and would hold her like she'd done in earlier years. She wanted her mom, wanted to cry into her arms and have her kick Neil out.

But she honestly couldn't believe that would happen. There was no certainty so as her head somewhat cleared and Neil's harsh words became clearer again, she acted instinctively. She'd let Neil walk over her believing it was the safer route but now she acted as violent as if she were fighting off a demodog.

Max bit a finger on the hand that Neil was holding her with. The taste of copper filled her mouth and the cry that she heard only made her bight down harder. When she let go, Neil automatically took a step back giving Max the perfect angle to kick him as hard as she could between the legs. She ran around him, grabbed her book bag and skateboard, and was extremely thankful her window was open as she tumbled out of it and fell on the ground.

She just barely heard Neil's yelling as she rushed into the next backyard. Going to the road would have been easier but Neil likely would have gotten into his car and caught up with her. Instead she did a zigzag motion through the neighborhood, using the setting sun to help her hide.

Resting in a bush for a second, she put her skateboard through the straps of her book bag and put it on. It made it awkward and heavier but now she had the use of both her hands and would be able to run better.

The skateboard knocked against her back as she continued on into the approaching night. The closest place was Steve's and she wouldn't have to worry about sneaking around any parents either so she decided that was her main goal. It took her a few moments to find her bearings but once she spotted a street sign, she was off again.

Max cut through the woods, going alongside the road and making sure no one could have seen her if they drove by. She managed to get to the edge of Steve's backyard and upon seeing no one out or around, she quickly rushed by the pool and up to the side of the house. There was a window on the second floor that was open and Max grabbed hold of a pipe, determined to find safety as quickly as possible.

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Billy had been bored senseless. The first day he'd spent thoroughly looking over the first floor, going into every drawer he could see and even looking under couch cushions to find loose change and forgotten pens. The second day he spent his time exploring the second floor except for Steve's room and on the third day, he took that chance to see that last room.

He found a stack of old comic books from the last decade covered in dust and in a forgotten box. He'd taken them down to the living room where he had more space, laying them out and seeing if there was anything worth his while. He wasn't too keen on picking up any of the books he'd found in the house, most being construction manuals with several dictionaries, a bible, and a collection of dime store mystery novels mixed in. The comics he could at least get some enjoyment out of, remembering when he'd steal one from a stand since his dad had refused to waste money on them.

Looking over a few Batmans, an oddly large number of Silver Surfer, and a few from third-rate companies he'd never heard of, he remembered how he'd hide his own comics in the floorboard under his bed. He'd always been extra careful to make sure his dad wasn't home every time he opened it up, all the way until he'd turned twelve and became less interested in them.

When Steve got back, he'd gaped in shock. He looked like he'd forgotten his rather large collection existed. Then a sour frown came over his face. "You were in my room."

Billy shrugged without a care.

"Please," Steve growled through gritted teeth, "ask next time."

When Billy didn't even respond, he kind of expected a fight to happen, at least on a small scale. In a way, he was hoping for one because honestly, he was bored out of his mind. Yet Steve didn't rise to the bait. Not when he smoked indoors without a window open after Steve bought him another pack of cigarettes or when he left food on the counter or the fridge open. Steve got irritated, sure, but never really mad.

It was unnerving almost. Billy wasn't used to this kind of patience from really anyone and he had no idea why Steve was doing it. He supposed the simple answer was that Steve was a better person, though Billy knew that wasn't really hard when being compared to himself. Still, the lack of fights honestly just made the week drag on all the more and Steve was hardly ever there too. It was isolating almost as Steve was either out grabbing things, doing favors, or at the Lab. That first day he'd asked if Billy had wanted to come with him and Billy had politely replied, "Fuck no."

He still felt that way about the Lab, even if staying in the two-story house all alone was isolating and a bit unsettling. It was still nothing compared to being in that hospital-like room so Billy dealt with the loneliness.

By the fourth day, Max sent along another bag of his things that was mostly filled with clothes, another pack of cigarettes she'd found hidden under his bed, and some small knickknacks. He told Steve to thank her and he meant it. There wasn't much there but now it was really all he had and it felt good holding onto those few things. Once he'd finished going through the bag and sorting the clothes into the drawer in his room, he finished going through the comics. Nothing really interested him though, and he began to focus mostly on watching TV and sleeping. Despite being awake for nearly three weeks now, Billy was still always tired.

According to Dr. Owens, it was more of a mental thing since his consciousness hadn't gone to sleep in over six months. It didn't matter what his body had been doing. Billy wasn't sure how much of that was fact or speculation but considering how he felt most days, he was willing to believe it. So when TV bored him too, he usually went back to his room to sleep as Steve usually wasn't around to bother.

At the end of that first week, Billy ended up falling asleep just after eating a makeshift lunch. The one good thing about being so tired was that he was usually too tired to dream but this time was different. As he lay down in the spare room and his eyes slipped shut, he ended up opening them seconds later to darkness.

He looked down and those clothes were back. He felt his head and found no evidence of surgery. His heart leapt into his throat, choking him so he couldn't scream. He tried to run forward but as his foot hit the water, the ground that was supposed to be there disappeared. The never ending blackness and the flat plane with an inch of water had always been the main consistencies of this hell. Now even they were breaking down.

Billy tried to grab for an edge, there had to be one. He'd just been standing on it! But his hands met nothing and in seconds the darkness was swallowing him, water rushing into his mouth and nose. He could feel himself going down to impossible depths and the water no longer felt like water but something foreign and invasive.

Struggling did nothing as he felt himself drowning, felt himself dying despite how he remained conscious and aware.

It was him.

The inky darkness showed himself and Billy wondered when he'd been turned upside down. He looked at himself looking up, perfectly calm and not struggling. The mirror him reached up and grabbed his arm, dragging him further down and propelling himself upwards. Billy thrashed as hard as he could, tried to grab hold but it was like trying to hold air.

He could feel it crushing him now. Harder and more painful than before as he tried to let out at least one final scream but all the ink did was rush forward and into his mouth. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't breathe! Help! He couldn't—

Billy jolted forward, grabbing hold of the sweat soaked sheets before he looked at the dark sky outside. As his eyes formed unwelcomed tears, he rapidly looked around, cataloging everything he could see, making sure he really was in the spare room in Steve's parents'

house. He had to make sure.

He'd had episodes connected to both being in the Lab and the dark place but never a dream and never that real feeling. He was shaking like a leaf, his hands clenched together and unsuccessfully trying to still.

Even after what felt like ages had passed, the shaking didn't stop so he simply went with it and clumsily pulled off his shirt and boxers as quickly as he could. Pulling on some clean boxers, Billy walked out of his room and to the restroom. He sat on the edge of the tub so he could splash water on his face and chest. He wanted to take a bath or even just a quick shower. He felt so dirty and his skin wouldn't stop crawling like the inkiness was still there, surrounding and suffocating him. He couldn't though since he still had the cast, and he couldn't stop shaking enough to really manage the necessary coordination.

All he could do was splash water over himself and rub at his face and arms with a towel.

"Um...hey Billy..."

He turned, too tired and still too shaken up to do anything but stare. This would be the perfect opportunity, wouldn't it? Just have at it Steve, Billy thought. Say your worst, laugh at how Billy Hargrove can't stop fucking shaking from some weird dream.

The feeling of humiliation, of guilt, he needed it. It made sense and he could understand and it would be so much easier to deal with. But Steve just seemed dead-set on making everything more difficult for Billy instead.

"I was going to watch a movie. My parents have a TV and VHS player in their room. You up for that?"

Not one scathing remark or wicked laugh. Not even a question about what had happened, though Billy was sure it was obvious enough. From the looks of it, Steve had been home for a bit so he had to know Billy had just been asleep.

"Whatever. Wasn't doing anything anyways," Billy murmured. It was

easier than admitting how fucking scared he still was, how much that dream had felt far too real and far too dangerous and that the last thing he wanted was to be alone. He pushed himself up and asked, "What do you got?"

Steve didn't mention the shaking as they both camped out on his parents' bed, Billy still only in his boxers as he lay against the decorative and plush pillows, pulling the comforter up over him. Steve made suggestions but Billy didn't really answer and Steve finally put in a film that likely belonged to his parents. Billy didn't pay attention to it and simply took comfort from the fact that he wasn't alone, from the light flashing on the TV, the feeling of the cool sheets, and the warmth of the body near him.

The shaking started to still as the movie went on and Billy felt like he was going to pass out again. The dream had only made him more exhausted and he felt like he could sleep for years. As his eyes started to slip shut though, a loud thud had him sitting upright. Next to him, Steve was equally as tense.

Billy didn't say a word as his mind came up with anything from a burglar to government spies to otherworldly monsters. God, what was his life now that otherworldly monsters seemed more likely than the other options?

Steve silently got up and Billy followed, careful of his cast and the noise that it could cause. Steve opened the door to the hallway and started to ease forward. He seemed to know where he was going, probably had some weapon in mind that he was going to try and grab. Billy stayed by the door, fists clenched as he watched him go. It had sounded like the thing was on the second floor and the thought made Billy afraid to breathe.

*Creak.*

Steve was ready to bolt as he saw his own bedroom door get pushed open but before either teen could do anything drastic, Max stepped out and looked at them both. When her gaze hit Billy and he could fully see her face, his stomach dropped just as Max's face lit up with anger.

“You knew! You knew so why didn’t you tell me! Why didn’t you tell me!?”

“I was trying to protect you!” Billy instinctively yelled back.

“How is hurting Lucas trying to protect me?! You should have told me!”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything!”

“It would have protected me better than you hurting Lucas and me!”

“If you’d just—”

“No!” screamed Max. “I don’t care if your solution was to give in! Mine wasn’t! Steve, where’s your bathroom!” she demanded, heading whipping around.

“Uh-uh here! I think-there should be a first aid kit,” Steve quickly said, following her over.

Billy leaned against the wall, still struck by Max’s last words. He hadn’t been giving in. He hadn’t! He’d done what he’d had to do to survive and he’d tried to make Max see that but...had he just made everything worse? Had Max become the brunt end of everything because his father could no longer focus his attention on him?

He hadn’t wanted this. With all the bad blood between them, he’d never wanted this for Max.

Billy’s feet seemed to move involuntarily as he went down the hall and rounded the doorframe to look in the bathroom.

“Don’t worry; it’s not mine,” said Max. She’d already dropped her book bag and skateboard off to the side and was washing the blood smeared across her lips. For an explanation she said, “I bit his finger.”

With the blood gone, it didn’t look life threatening like it had a moment ago but in the bright bathroom light, the developing bruise was starker, dark purple colors spreading across her cheek. Steve was looking through a kit he’d found under the sink but there wasn’t much to do since there were no actual cuts or open wounds.



“Max I—”

Steve tried to stop them. “Guys, please don’t—” but his attempt was fruitless as Max talked over him.

“He put you in the hospital. Didn’t he,” Max said. There was no question in her voice, her eyes hard as she glared up at Billy.

He couldn’t answer. He supposed it made sense that Max would figure it out but he couldn’t think of how to respond.

“That’s why you hate hospitals, why you wanted out of the Lab. Hopper said he could understand why you’d hurt your dad. He said it made more sense than some monster. He could see you getting revenge on your dad but you can’t. You couldn’t do it. You never could,” whispered Max. She was sort of rambling now, both Steve and Billy frozen in place, tears unwillingly falling down Billy’s cheeks. “Why? Why could you never say no? Why could you never stop him? He hurt you! He...he threw me into a wall and I had...I had to bite him and kick him and run and...and I couldn’t-couldn’t call my mom because I couldn’t...I was alone and you-you didn’t warn me! You didn’t tell me!”

Billy grabbed hold of Max and pulled her in close. Whispered apologies bubbled between his lips as Max continued to yell at him, her fists beating against his chest.

“Why didn’t you!? Why!!!”

“I’m sorry...I’m sorry—”

“Why!?”

Billy could only think of the times he’d asked those same questions. Only no one had come before him. There had been no one to talk to, no way for him to understand why him. All he could do was hide under a bed or in the backyard and cry when no one was looking. But Max was right here, hurting and scared and angry and Billy understood. He understood far too well.

He hadn’t had a mother to look after him, any close friends or an older sibling. He’d had nothing and Max was so close to that fate. He

could push her away now and close up again and force himself to remember that his dad was his dad and he had to love him but—

He didn't. Billy thought of all the times he'd needed someone to hold him and so he held Max just like that as her fists stopped hitting him quite as hard and the tears came more readily. Maybe it was because of that dream, because he was already so emotionally raw and just didn't have the energy to fight back. It didn't matter though as now he just held onto her, his shoulders shaking as he choked out the word 'sorry' every chance he got.

The little details after that were harder to follow. In his head, the idea that this was all his fault ran round and round like a loop. If he'd done something more, been better, saw his dad as Max saw him, maybe he could have done something to stop this.

He knew Steve was helping out, checking Max for any other injuries and disappearing to get things like ice. At some point they were in the parents' bedroom again, Steve asking Max gentle questions and finding something to put on the TV. Billy wasn't paying attention, still wrapped up in his own mind and just so exhausted.

Max was next to him, ice in a bag and covered in a cloth pressed to her face. Billy carefully took her hand and moved it so that it covered the area better. Max didn't say anything, just looked away as Billy did the same. Suddenly the crushing darkness didn't seem as bad and he wished it had finished him off before he'd woken up again.

## 6. Waking Up

### Notes for the Chapter:

So as a present to everyone and in line with the holidays, here's an extra update. Don't worry, I'll still be updating this Thursday but I figured I'd get this one out too, particularly considering the last chapter's ending. Also, just a quick note that all tags should be added (yes this is going Steve/Billy so apologies for those not into it but that tag isn't disappearing) and I added an extra chapter for the epilogue. So as always, thank you tons and I hope you enjoy!

Steve had figured that once he'd gotten home and found Billy asleep, the rest of the evening would be easy enough. Yet then he'd heard the tortured scream that he was fairly sure Billy hadn't even realized he'd let out. He'd watched him go to the bathroom, his entire form shaking from some horrid dream. Then he'd given Billy an option. Not to really talk about what had happened, he knew he couldn't be that direct with him, but simply a small comfort, an excuse for him to not be alone.

Billy had taken it and Steve had wondered if he'd fall asleep again as the movie played but then that thud had sounded and everything got so much more complicated. He'd figured that really trying to understand Billy was pointless and he'd set himself on just dealing with him from a day to day basis. Now though, with Max's words and seeing the siblings crying against each other, Steve understood a lot more than he'd wanted to.

He hadn't wanted to leave Max or Billy but in all honesty, neither of them seemed to notice he was even there. Because of that, Steve chanced it and hurried to the second phone his parents had in their bedroom. He dialed Hopper's number for the cabin and anxiously waited for him to pick up.

When he heard the click, he spoke first. "Hopper, it's Steve."

“What the hell happened? Has Billy—”

“No he...Max is here. She...I haven't gotten a complete story but basically Neil hit her pretty bad. She managed to get away though, ended up here. Figured it would be best to give you the heads-up before you go into work tomorrow. I think Neil's going to try and spin this on her, make it sound like she attacked him and ran off.”

“Christ. Do you need—”

“It's fine. She can stay here. Of course I'm not going to try and push her on someone else. Not now,” Steve quickly said. “I'm guessing it would probably be better to keep her safe, wait for this whole quarantine thing to blow over, and then deal with Neil later, right?”

“Yeah, it will be. Listen, what are her injuries like? If it's too serious I can come down and get her to Doc so she can be looked over.”

Steve described what he'd seen and then set the phone to the side to go and do what Hopper had just instructed him to. He made sure nothing was fractured and she didn't have a concussion either. It seemed that the only real damage was a really bad bruise which Hopper told him to just make sure she kept some ice on and that it would be good to have her lie down.

Hopper promised to keep him updated in regards to Neil and if anything happened there and Steve told him not to worry about the fact that he was now taking care of both Billy and Max. His parents had left him with a fairly impressive amount of spending money (apparently they'd doubted he'd get a summer job and part of the money was his graduation present too) but Steve was planning on just using it all for groceries and any other household needs.

After he finished talking to Hopper, Steve made sure Max got that cold pack and set her up in his parents' room with Billy by her side. Max mumbled, “I'm fine,” every once in a while though Steve didn't really believe her. Billy remained silent, face utterly torn up and his color still drained from the shouting match and then the crying fit him and Max had gone through.

Steve put on another movie, a copy of *Popeye* that a cousin had left

behind during a family get-together. He left the room after making sure Max didn't need anything and checked on both of them throughout the early night. They both fell asleep pretty quickly and Steve made sure to grab an extra blanket to throw over them and to turn the TV off when they obviously weren't awake. He tried to get some sleep too but all he got were short bursts, dozing in and out as his mind remained locked on Neil and what he now knew about the man.

He had no idea what the right course in this was, how he was going to deal with Max and Billy in the morning and if Billy would regress to that asshole mask, hiding all the pain that Steve had just seen him in. Steve wanted to find Neil and do to him exactly what he'd done to Max and more, but that wasn't an option and it wouldn't really fix anything right now.

He tried to think of what he'd want after something so traumatic, something that maybe a friend could give or a parent. Billy and Max didn't have their parents and though Max hadn't really mentioned her mom, it was obvious that she hadn't trusted her enough to go to her.

At about four in the morning when it was obvious he was never really going to get to sleep, Steve figured out there was at least something he could do that might cheer them both up.

On that first shopping trip, he'd acted automatically, grabbing everything he was used to seeing in the fridge only to realize that most of those things required cooking and he didn't know how to cook. The next few trips involved getting a lot of peanut butter and chips and bread and bologna slices and simple things like that but all the food from that first trip was still there so Steve went down and started to look through it. He got a few of his mom's cookbooks and went to all the sections on breakfast, seeing exactly what he could make. It wouldn't be anything spectacular but he bet they would be hungry as hell and went about trying to do his best to make something nice.

He followed the directions as closely as he could, constantly checking them and the pictures as he got out pots and pans and plates and utensils. The sun rose outside as countless timers dinged and Steve

rushed around, not always getting to the items in time.

Getting preoccupied cutting up some fruit and finishing the grits, he accidentally burnt the bottom of the casserole but it didn't look ruined and he crossed his fingers that it was still ok. He started to section things off among three separate plates and Steve taste-tested the casserole to see if it was alright. Certainly wasn't like anything his mom made but hopefully it would put a smile on Max's and Billy's faces. He then poured two glasses of milk and put the Nesquik on the side, not sure if Max liked chocolate milk or not.

As he put the bottle back in the fridge, he quickly looked up to hear, "Holy hell! What tornado came through here?"

Max walked in, still with her jeans and shirt on from last night though she was now barefoot. The bruise still looked pretty bad but at least the swelling seemed to have stayed down through the night. Her eyes were a bit red and puffy but she otherwise already seemed better. Steve suspected it wasn't actually because she was feeling better though. It seemed she took after Billy in trying to cover things up with a confident tone and a shoulder shrug of indifference.

Billy followed right after her, still in his boxers but with a plane tank top on and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth now. Steve internally groaned but going by Billy's own red rimmed eyes, he decided not to fight it and just silently pushed open a window as Billy and Max looked over the mess.

"I made breakfast," Steve finally said when neither of them seemed ready to talk.

"Really? Thought you just took a bag of flour and tried to make it look like it'd snowed indoors," Billy sarcastically replied.

Steve rolled his eyes. "You know me. Just trying to go for some nice atmosphere." He put the plates onto the counter in front of the two stools that were there. "Sorry if it's not great. It's my first time doing something like this. Do you like chocolate milk Max?"

She nodded and he mixed the Nesquik into the glass and put it by one of the plates. Steve looked at them and they gave him back

confused stares like they couldn't fully understand why Steve would do this for them. They slowly sat down though, Billy holding his cigarette in one hand as he picked up a fork with the other and started to pick apart the plate. Steve ate from his own as he stood on the other side and continued to watch them. He didn't want to bring up what had happened last night and imagined this wouldn't be pleasant for anyone.

They needed to talk though, at least enough so they knew where they all stood.

Max was going through her plate pretty equally, taking a bite from the fruit, then the grits and then the casserole and back again. Billy had shoved all the fruit to the side and mixed the grits and casserole into a large mess that he shoveled into his mouth and smoked in between bites. It was disgusting but again, Steve kept himself from saying anything about it. He was sure Billy would get peeved enough with what he was about to say instead.

Steve waited until Max finished swallowing when he said, "I talked to Hopper last night."

They both froze, looking at him from across the counter. Cigarette ash hit the table.

"For right now just...think of this like protective custody Max. I know this isn't how you wanted to spend your summer but you can't go out, not unless it's with me or Joyce or Hopper," Steve stressed. Max looked at the table, her brow scrunching up as Billy took a shaky drag. "Once Nancy's awake and the Lab has eradicated this thing, Hopper will help protect you both from Neil. It'll get messy. You'll probably be questioned and Neil could get a lawyer to fight—"

"You're talking about going to court," Billy interrupted.

"It would be a long ways off and—"

"I'll do it," Max replied.

"You don't have to promise anything," Steve sighed. "I just want you to know what could be ahead."

Billy shook his head though. He took one last drag and then snubbed the cigarette out on his plate. "I can't."

"I'm not making you sign a statement. I'm just telling you what Hopper told me," stressed Steve. "Besides, with both of you giving statements against him and what with the connections Hopper has with the Doc, they could get you guys the best lawyer money can buy, and Neil could be put in jail for a long time."

"I can't—"

Steve slammed his hand on the table. "You know what Billy? This isn't about you! Not right now! Your dad beat the living hell out of Max and she is holding up so damn well that it's honestly insane! Hopper and I and everyone else is willing to do what we can to stop this—Max just agreed without a second thought to standing up to that bastard in court if necessary—and yet despite putting you in the hospital for god knows what messed up reason—"

"Steve, please—"

"No! I'm not finished! He put you in the hospital! What happened last night basically proved he's beaten you before and it's obvious you didn't want that to happen to Max, but if we don't do something now then what will happen once this is all over? You can't go back to live with him. It's done! Neither of you can and with no assurance that Max's mom will stop this, trusting Hopper is the only thing you can do so don't say you can't speak up against him because if you ever wanted to protect Max, then this is the damn way to do it!" And with that Steve took up the dishtowel and flicked it out at Billy with the final words, "And eat your damn fruit," as he turned to gather up the dishes.

Steve didn't turn back around right away. He was kind of shocked with himself for what had just happened and for a few tense seconds, he worried he'd gone too far. He knew that Billy had been abused so what was the solution? Not to fucking yell at him! That was for sure but he'd just been so tired of Billy's whole shtick. He closed himself off and acted distant and like an ass and ignored all the problems thrown at him. But right now it wasn't just about Billy. He had to understand that! If he had any feelings towards Max, any love for her



as a sister, he couldn't be let off the hook. Not with this. But what if Steve had been too hard? What if he'd just made it worse by—

“Fuck. Who would have known you'd make a better mother than my own.”

“Hey! I told you to stop with that,” Steve said as he turned around and waved the dish towel at him again.

Max snorted. “He's even got his hands on his hips.”

“Ah, pouty much?” grinned Billy.

“You're both insufferable, you know that?” groaned Steve. “And I said finish your fruit!”

Billy put his hands up in mock surrender and as he went back to his fruit, Steve noticed the newly wiped away tears, still smeared on his cheek. Steve frowned, wondering if he'd done that yet Billy's lips were slightly turned up, soft and discreet but the smile still there. Steve didn't understand why but he relaxed all the same.

It took a bit more silence but slowly Steve was able to take the conversation away from the harshness of last night. He let the step-siblings take more cracks about him being a mother duck and how he was cleaning up everything. Despite his slight embarrassment over it, he gladly dealt with the teasing if only to see a smile on Max's face and to hear her laughing again.

---

Max sat in Steve's living room, going through all the things in her bag. Thankfully her walkie-talkie hadn't broken from the fall. There wasn't a lot else to take from her book bag though and she had zero clothes besides the ones on her back. She tried to think of what she could do as Steve continued to clean up in the kitchen and Billy lounged in the office downstairs to smoke.

Before she could come up with a definite solution though, a banging noise rang out. Max jolted and Billy rounded the corner, eyes wide and frozen. No way had she been followed! It couldn't be! He couldn't be here!

Steve appeared on the other side of the room. He held a finger to his lips and then rushed to the door where the banging was still continuing. He looked through the peephole and Max watched the tension in his shoulders disappear. He threw open the door which still made Max jerk even though she knew Steve wouldn't put them in danger.

And that was proven when instead of Neil, Ms. Byers and the kids all ran into the room.

"Max!" Lucas yelled.

"Holy shit! You're the color of an eggplant!" yelled Dustin just as Mike knocked him over the head. Mike yelled, "You can't say that!"

"Are you alright?" Will urgently asked.

Max nodded and sniffed away the tears. "Now...yeah. Yeah I'm ok."

"Did Hopper call you?" asked Steve as he looked to Ms. Byers.

"It was me!" Dustin piped up. "I was going to get Max and we were going to go together and meet up at the diner in the morning with everyone else-remember, we planned that-but Neil Hargrove was waiting and he chased me off and—"

"Dustin," groaned Steve. "The point."

"Oh. Right. I called the Chief, then contacted everyone else, and then Will's mom overheard, contacted the Chief too, got more details, and agreed to drive us all here."

"I don't think you made that any shorter," snorted Lucas. "But yeah, that's what happened."

"We all pitched in to give you some clothes. Mom also bought a few extra things on the way over," Will said. "I hope you don't mind."

Max quickly shook her head. They were all about the same size anyways and the fact that they had thought of this was incredibly sweet. After the initial reaction to her face and just making sure she was ok, Dustin, Mike, and Will got incredibly distracted by being in

Steve's house for the first time. While they looked around, Ms. Byers came over and said, "Could I talk to you and Billy for a second?"

Lucas gave her a concerned look but Max smiled and squeezed his hand before nodding. She followed her over to where Billy was off to the side and asked him the same thing. He shrugged and the three went into the office, away from everyone else.

Looking up at them, Max noted that she missed some kind of signal as Billy offered his cigarette and Ms. Byers gratefully took it, taking a few drags before passing it back. "What do you want?" Billy asked.

"I just wanted to make sure you two know that if you ever need anything, I'm here," Ms. Byers assured them. It was a simple enough sentence but the way she said it and the way she looked at Billy made it seem like he had some invisible bruise which made Max realize that she somehow knew the bigger picture.

Max watched the anger and hurt pass over Billy's face. Hopper had to have told her and Billy tried to get out, "You mean he told—"

"Sweetheart, please don't be angry with Jim. He was just doing what he thought best and he figured I could help," Ms. Byers gently said. Surprisingly, her calming touch did keep Billy from lashing out and she added, "Once Nancy's better and all this stuff with the fungus is settled, Hopper's going to try and see if I can act as a temporary guardian for Max. I know it may sound odd but if it's alright with the both of you, it would give Max more control than if she got put with some social worker. If you're not eighteen by then, I can do the same for you Billy but if you are, my house is obviously open."

Max closed her eyes for a moment and let out a tired sigh. She wanted to stay with her mom, wanted to ask why that wasn't an option, but she understood why. In things like this, an investigation would need to be made into both parents and while that happened, Max and Billy wouldn't be able to stay at home. She'd made her decision last night and this morning. She'd never liked Neil and now that she understood how much of a danger that he was, she'd do all she could to put him in jail.

But one look at Billy and she could see it wasn't that easy. She'd still

been so angry and on edge last night that she'd lashed out at Billy instinctively. She'd appreciated Steve's blow up too, he'd been right and she was pretty sure Billy knew that now. But since her head was a bit clearer she thought about how hard it was being from her mom and the uncertainty of whether or not she would have stopped Neil. What if things were switched? What if it was her mom hitting her and she had to testify against her?

At the very least, Billy didn't immediately break down and say he couldn't do it. Instead he just whispered, "Why help us?"

"Because it would be wrong not to," Ms. Byers said, like it was the simplest explanation in the world. "Obviously you can say no but I just want you to know the option is there. And Hop and I will of course come to you and talk everything through before we move forward with this."

"Thanks Ms. Byers," Max responded with a small smile.

"I told you. It's perfectly alright to call me Joyce," she said with a kind look.

"You're Will's mom. It's too weird," chuckled Max. "But thank you."

"Yeah...what she said," Billy mumbled.

Ms. Byers gave them both a gentle squeeze that Max definitely knew she needed and she suspected Billy appreciated it too, even if he didn't say anything. Billy continued to stay off to the side and Ms. Byers went to talk to Steve, probably further planning with the Lab and Neil and everything else.

Max found that the guys had moved into the kitchen, eyes moving around the still pretty messy area. "What the hell happened in here?" asked Dustin.

"Steve made us breakfast," Max smirked. "Wasn't too bad either."

They all laughed at the thought though they all kind of quieted for a moment, really looking at her face again. It was especially hard to ignore Will's wide eyes and Max forced herself to shake it off. "I'm fine. Really guys."

"We heard you ran all the way here," Lucas piped up with a worried glance.

"I had to and Steve's house was just closest. But hey! I at least didn't break the walkie-talkie," Max said, trying to look at the positive of it all.

Mike was clearly going the same route as he added, "You'll be in range of Dustin's house now."

"Yeah! I can help keep you updated on things on the outside," Dustin agreed.

"But we'll come bother you like, every day if you want," Lucas added. "We can definitely make this work."

"You'll have to bring some board games or something," Max grinned. "Steve has absolutely nothing to do here."

"We can get a really good D&D campaign set up and come here," Mike said.

"Do you think we could convince the Chief to let Jane come too?" asked Will.

"We should all try and convince him," Max said. "That would be awesome!"

"You guys do remember this is my house right?" asked Steve as he walked in. It was clear he was more amused than annoyed though and Dustin waved a carefree hand. "With everything we've been through, we're all family anyways. Mine is yours which also means yours is mine and I think I'm going to steal some of this," Dustin said looking at the left over casserole.

Steve laughed. "Have at it. You can all have some if you're hungry."

"Did you cook?" asked Ms. Byers as she came up beside him.

"Not extremely well but...yeah I did my best," Steve shrugged.

"Well it looks quite nice, besides the mess of course, but I'm sure it's

better than whatever I could come up with. Never really been one for cooking,” smiled Ms. Byers even as Will said, “You’re cooking’s great mom! I’ve always told you.”

As it turned out that all the kids had skipped out on breakfast to hurry and see Max, they did sit down and eat and talk. They spoke about plans for a D&D campaign and other nonsense things though they avoided almost all talk of summer and summer plans that were now out the window. Max kind of wished they’d pretend, at least for right now, that everything was alright and she wasn’t under house arrest. But she could also tell that they were really trying to distract her and it was appreciated in its own way.

Of course, they couldn’t stay the entire time and Ms. Byers did have work. They promised they’d come back tomorrow though and Dustin reminded her that they could talk now through the walkie-talkie which Max was looking forward to.

After they left, Max took her time looking through the bag of clothes that Ms. Byers had brought. She’d been kind enough to buy some toiletries and underwear and socks which was good because Max hadn’t really wanted to have that conversation with Steve. All the jeans, shirts, and shorts were clearly from the guys though and Max was able to tell what came from whom.

Steve got her set up in his parents’ room and because of their trip, it was easy to fully clear out one of the dresser drawers so she could put her things in it. All the ground rules had already been set and Max fully understood why it was too dangerous to leave. It meant she was ready to be pretty bored and she was for the most part when her friends weren’t around.

There was TV to watch and Steve had some old comics that Billy showed her but otherwise she just waited for her friends to come back so that she could hang out with them. It was easier to be distracted when they were here. They talked nonsense and complained about the upcoming school year and planned out their next campaign as they focused on the fake monsters rather than the real ones.

Whenever they were over, Billy tended to disappear upstairs and

Steve was still fairly absent as he ran around town and helped Hopper where he could and went to the Lab to see Nancy. Max went with him to the Lab twice but otherwise there were hours that were just her and Billy in the house.

Eventually she found she couldn't help but ask. She'd been pushing it off, remembering how Billy had cried as well and his difficulty of accepting what he might have to do against his father. But a few days passed and he seemed a bit calmer since then and Max just really *really* wanted to know.

She cornered him while he was smoking a cigarette in the downstairs office and bluntly said, "How did you know Neil would react badly to Lucas?"

Billy snorted. "I lived with him for years Max. It's kind of hard not to see that he's racist as all hell."

"But you knew," she stressed. "You knew he'd act violently and you knew it would be Lucas that specifically set him off." An idea sprouted in her mind. "Is that why he put you in the hospital?"

Billy tensed up and he quickly snubbed out his cigarette. "Basically," he muttered as he got up to leave. However, if he was going for a dramatic exit, it was kind of lessened by the cast still on his leg. Max easily followed him into the living room.

"He threw me against a wall and yelled in my face," Max pressed. "That was for just seeing me be in the same car as Lucas for five seconds. What did you do?"

"You're too young to understand Max."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen but—"

"Then how am I too young? I'm fourteen now," Max retorted. "Billy, did no one tell you being racist is bad?"

"I know that being racist is bad! I'm not a moron Max." He tried to escape her by going into the kitchen but she followed him all the

same.

“Then why are you defending him?”

“How the hell am I defending him?! I know it’s wrong and I didn’t want you to have to go through it. It’s that simple.” Billy looked through the fridge, clearly avoiding Max’s gaze.

“Yeah, you think it’s wrong what he did to me but you haven’t once said it was wrong what he did to you.”

Billy didn’t respond, slamming the fridge shut. He walked out of the kitchen and headed for the stairs.

“Why is it different? Is it because I’m a girl?”

“It’s exactly because of that now shut the fuck up Max,” Billy growled out as he walked up the stairs.

“Really? Because I was afraid he would go farther! You think he would have stopped hitting me because I’m—”

“That’s not what I mean!”

“Then what happened?” Max asked as they got to the top of the stairs. “What were you doing? Did your dad...” She kept asking anything and everything that came to mind, trying to understand what the difference was as Billy walked into the spare room. He tried to close the door on her but she slipped in and crossed her arms. “He did a really bad thing to you and you’re fine with it.”

“I am far from fine with it!”

“Then why defend him? Why! Hopper knows more than me and he helped you and I know he wouldn’t believe you getting hurt was right—”

“Hopper was-was lying! What he said to me doesn’t just change everything!” Billy sat down on his bed in a huff, covering his face with his hands. He was so much more vulnerable than Max was used to but then, she supposed she’d opened up to Billy in ways she hadn’t wanted to or planned either. She was on the edge of understanding



him. She could feel it if he'd just answer.

Max sat down and thought about how kind Steve had been that night, the night that her world had crashed down and everything she'd planned for the summer had to be thrown into the trash. She'd mostly ignored him and had just murmured the same words over and over but in retrospect, it was only because he'd been kind that she hadn't broken down further.

She thought about how she'd been talking to Billy, trying to demand he answer about what he did. But that made it sound like he'd done something wrong and that's what Billy thought too. He thought he'd done something horrible enough to justify his dad in hurting him so Max tried to change her phrasing, tried to mimic Steve of that night. It took a bit, coming up with something that she felt didn't imply blame on Billy but she finally murmured, "Where were you?"

Billy was silent for a long time but the fact that he hadn't exploded showed that there was at least a chance. He stayed silent, making it a point to avoid eye contact with her when something in him just seemed to collapse. He looked defeated.

"In my room. He wasn't supposed to be home."

"And he just came in and hurt you?"

"There was more to it. I knew he wasn't going to be there. He shouldn't have been. I had his schedule memorized but he...I was with a friend."

"So you were friends with someone of color?"

"Not...quite," said Billy.

"You mean...a friend like a girlfriend? Like Jonathan and Nancy?"

"He wasn't that. It never got that far."

Max blinked. Now...many questions were coming up but Max forced herself to stay silent. She waited for Billy to say more.

"We...dad came in and saw us. I didn't hear his car pull up,"

whispered Billy. "We just...he saw and I...I managed to block dad's path and...and he ran out and my dad grabbed me and he just...he made sure I wouldn't forget what would happen if I did something like that again."

"Is that...why we moved? Did he...catch you again?" She remembered all of the times that Billy had adamantly claimed it was Max and her mother that had made them move, not him despite Neil straight up saying it was because of Billy. Max had never fully understood what Billy had done and had chalked it up to him just being an ass. But this made more sense. In Billy's mind, he'd disappointed his dad again and of course he would have tried everything to show that the move had been because of someone else.

Max's thoughts were proven right as Billy murmured, "Sort of. A bit different but...yeah."

"I thought you had girlfriends."

"Dad wanted me to so I did. It's called acting Max," Billy sarcastically murmured, no humor in his voice.

"But I don't get why your dad would hit you for it."

"It's because you're too young Max. You don't get how the world works."

"Hopper isn't young and he thinks what happened was wrong," Max shot back. "So you like guys. I think Will does too though he hasn't told anyone. It doesn't mean your dad should have hurt you."

Billy stared with confusion clear in his eyes.

"He still shouldn't have done it," she repeated.

"Max I-I just told you why—"

"Yeah, you told me why but that doesn't make it any more right," grumbled Max. "You could tell me two plus two is five until the end of days but that doesn't change that it equals four. Your dad's wrong."

“No, he just—”

Max pointed to her still very clear bruise. “He’s wrong about Lucas and he’s wrong for hitting me. Your dad is just wrong.”

“And you’re right are you? You’re thirteen!”

“Fourteen,” Max reminded him as she gave him a little shove, “and I’m not just the twerp you spell me out to be. I’m actually pretty smart.”

Maybe the old Billy would have pushed her back and not to kindly yelled that she wasn’t getting this. But this was the Billy that had been stuck in the dark place, the one who’d formed some type of connection with Nancy, who was able to deal with Steve under one roof, and was willing to hug her in one of her darkest moments. This Billy didn’t knock her back but just ruffled her hair. “Nothing’s right anymore.”

“Have you ever thought about how it might have not been right in the first place?”

“If that’s true...then my childhood was completely pointless,” replied Billy. “All of it just wrong and full of lies and falsities and...an utter fucking waste of time and somehow monsters and other dimensions are supposed to be more right and real than any of that.”

“Hey, I didn’t say everything was perfect,” snorted Max. “But this is better than before.”

“You think being forced to hide out here is better than before?”

“Yeah. I do,” retorted Max. “I can tolerate you now.”

An involuntary snort escaped Billy and he gave Max an incredulous look. He looked like he didn’t believe her and Max couldn’t completely blame him. All they’d done was yell and scream at each other for the longest time. It was like that had been all they could do. But Max made sure she didn’t look like she was messing with him or making a joke about this because she honestly meant it now. She knew Billy had always complained he hadn’t wanted a sibling but that hadn’t really been the same for Max. Besides, it felt good having

someone who'd been through similar things, who could understand her better because of similar situations and being forced to deal with the same people.

Max tried to convey that feeling in her face as she looked at Billy and opened up her hand.

"After all, we're still siblings," Max said.

"For better or worse huh?"

"Sounds like the definition of our lives."

Billy smiled at that and slowly took Max's hand and squeezed. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry I didn't try."

"I didn't let you," Billy quickly said. "I didn't want you in my life. And if I'm being perfectly honest, being dragged into your world isn't exactly a walk in the park but...siblings."

"For better or worse," agreed Max.

Billy smiled at that and Max felt better too. She understood him better than she ever had and she no longer worried about Billy and her falling back on old practices. She was glad she'd pushed and so she decided to do one last small push.

"You want to watch a film? I mean, Steve has a crap video collection but it could be fun. You know, actually doing something as siblings for once."

"I'd...like that," Billy finally said.

Max grinned and pulled Billy back onto his feet. They headed towards the parents' room and went through the extremely bad film collection but they eventually found something that they both thought they'd get a good laugh at and put it on.

---

Steve was visiting the Byers, double checking how Will was and

helping Joyce with a few chores since Jonathan was always at the Lab. He felt like he'd become an errand boy of sorts having the most freedom out of everyone as he ran around town to do things for Hopper or to grab something for Joyce or to pick up groceries for Billy and Max back at home.

He didn't mind it. In the times where he'd probably be sitting on his butt and twiddling his thumbs or having an awkward conversation with Billy, he at least got to be active and distract himself from the current problems instead.

Because of that, he helped Joyce with a burst pipe at home and a few other chores but still made sure to call his house so that Billy and Max knew he might be a little late. Joyce was busy making something for him to take back home when her phone rang and all plans flew out the window. Joyce listened to the speaker, eyes getting wider with every second before she hung it up and spun on Steve and Will.

"It was Hopper. Nancy's awake."

"Oh my god you-we've got to get to the Lab!" Steve quickly said.

Joyce nodded. "Mike should be there. It's his sister—"

"I can grab Billy and Max and Dustin on the way," Steve suggested.

"We could pick up everyone else, right mom?" asked Will.

"Yes, yes that sounds good. Hop's already there. She seems to be doing well and is asking after everyone else."

The thought made Steve want to run there all the faster but as he rushed out of the house, he reminded himself that he needed to go home first. It was fairly late, getting close to ten now, but Steve figured Max and Billy wouldn't care. They'd want to be there for her and considering the connection between Billy and Nancy, Steve could easily see him getting peeved if Steve skipped them over to see her first.

There was still a sense of desperation though and he sped faster than Billy usually did as he rushed across town and into his driveway. He

ran in and up the stairs, checking Billy's room first which was empty. He headed into his parents' room and as he opened the door, the scene he was met with was a sweet one.

The TV was on but blank, likely having finished a tape. Billy was slightly propped up by pillows, his head leaning back and his mouth hanging open. He softly snored as it looked like Max had fallen asleep against his shoulder only to slip down so her head was in his lap. It was the most sibling-like thing Steve had ever seen them do and he felt a little guilty as he yelled, "Guys—!"

The scene shattered as Billy shot forward and Max went up, leading to her forehead connecting with his chin. Billy's teeth hit against each other with a sound that made Steve's teeth hurt just from hearing it.

"Ow! What the fuck Steve!"

Both Billy and Max shot him equally fierce glares as they rubbed their injuries. Again, Steve was pretty sure they'd never looked more alike than in that moment. Nevertheless, he decided to save those observations for later and blurted out, "Nancy's awake! Come on!"

"Why didn't you start with that?!" yelled Billy. He jumped to his feet and Max did the same.

"Technically I did," snorted Steve and the three rushed down the stairs. Billy and Max were still in pajamas and very much barefoot but it was obvious neither cared as they piled into Steve's car. He sped down the street and over to Dustin's house, jerking to a stop.

"Where the hell is this?" asked Billy just as Steve said, "Max, I promised I'd pick up Dustin. Can you go throw a rock at his window or something?"

She nodded and rushed off, giving Steve just a few seconds to confirm what he'd suspected. Billy was excited and incredibly apprehensive over this. It was definitely a good thing Steve hadn't left him behind. He looked as desperate to see Nancy as Steve felt.

A few seconds later, Dustin, also barefoot and clad in pajamas, and Max rushed back to the car.

“Shit!” cried Dustin. “I can’t believe Nancy’s awake! Flore it Steve!”

“Buckle up first.”

“Ah come on—”

“Really?!” asked Billy.

“Safety first,” Steve pointed out.

Dustin rolled his eyes. “How did you go from King of Cool to number one mom?”

“I adopted an idiot with a pet demodog and five of his friends,” snorted Steve. “Buckle up.”

Dustin did, Max following suit and only then did Steve step on the gas pedal and go just the tiniest bit over the speed limit.

---

So many years. Decades in fact. That’s what it felt like. Even with Eleven’s daily visits it had felt like so much time was passing, that Nancy was missing out on so much.

When Eleven told her that Dr. Owens might have had a breakthrough, she didn’t fully believe her. Why should she? Maybe he’d proven himself to others but never to Nancy. She still felt like she’d be trapped forever, the idea that she would never see anyone again filling her mind.

And then she’d opened her eyes. She’d looked up at something other than black to find Jonathan on one side and the Chief on the other and Eleven and Dr. Owens at the foot of her bed along with a lot of unfamiliar guys in white coats.

It took a moment for the realization that she’d survived to set in but when it did she found tears welling up in her eyes as she grabbed hold of Jonathan and kissed him as uncoordinated as if it was the first time and as passionate as if it was the last. She’d hugged the Chief, much to his surprise, but he’d slowly hugged her back and she of course couldn’t leave Eleven out of her gratitude either.

She felt so tired and sitting up seemed to take effort but Dr. Owens assured her that was to be expected. Her body was returning to its normal conditions and he mentioned that in a few hours, what was left of the pods would be flushed from her systems thanks to the drugs they'd given her.

Nancy asked after the others, and it seemed just as she did, Mike was there and running into her arms. She'd never felt more grateful to hold her brother, the tears coming again and Mike crying to.

"You're awake!" he yelled.

"I am," Nancy agreed with a large smile. "What have mom and dad been saying?"

"I'm pretty sure they think you eloped with Jonathan," grinned Mike.

Jonathan blushed and Nancy couldn't help but laugh at the thought. "What a surprise it'll be when I finally walk through the door, huh?"

"It will be a little longer before I'd suggest that," Dr. Owens quickly added.

"I know. I know," sighed Nancy. "Possible relapses and all that. But for now I'm going to just focus on the fact that I'm back if you don't mind."

Dr. Owens simply nodded, not seeming to mind her slightly ruder than necessary tone. She quickly turned her focus away from him though to Lucas and Will who quickly said how happy they were that she was awake along with Joyce giving her a wonderfully good hug.

By the time the hug ended, she looked back and saw that Steve, Dustin, and Max were there as well. Nancy knew about what had happened to Max from Eleven, now getting confirmation by the dull bruise on her cheek. She didn't say anything about it, the moment not right, but Nancy made a mental note to check on her when she could.

And then hugging Steve felt so good too. They may have ended rather badly but he was still very much one of her best friends. Her eyes moved to him and then to everyone else. They were all there



and everything was finally right—

A cold fear suddenly grew in her heart.

Billy wasn't there. Why? Where was he? What if...oh god what if they'd lied to keep her calm? What if all that Eleven had said had been practiced words? A script formed by Dr. Owens or Hopper? She looked around her, not at the people but the room. A too large room with no sign of there ever being another bed in it for Billy. Oh god! He was—

"Nancy," Jonathan urgently said, grabbing her arm. "What's wrong?"

"Billy-where—"

"He's getting his cast off first," Steve quickly jumped in. He squeezed her hand. "He's alright. He'll be here in a second."

And like that, Nancy deflated, the fear melting away as she looked at all the kind and reassuring eyes that confirmed Steve's words. There were plenty of confused looks too but those didn't worry her. If their roles were switched, she could easily understand why worrying about Billy would have seemed weird—hold on. Did they say cast?

"What cast?" asked Nancy.

Several people talked at once before Steve quickly took control and started to tell her some of the smaller details that Eleven had left out. Everyone let Steve tell most of the story until the noise of the door opened and everyone's heads turned to look.

Billy awkwardly stood there, a scientist walking away after presumably escorting him to the room. She noted the partially shaved head though his hair had grown since the surgery. He'd buzzed the area, making it work as an actual hair style while still somewhat hiding the surgical scar. She could tell which leg had just had the cast taken off from the light scars caused by the nails in Steve's bat and the slightly paler skin. He was also in plain shorts and a tank top which over all was just really weird for Nancy. In the dark place nothing changed but finally seeing Billy again really just showed how much had.

He stood on the edge, looking at everyone like he was waiting for permission to approach. When no one said anything though, Nancy took it upon herself to speak. "It's good to see you Billy. I was actually getting kind of lonely there."

"Missed me?" snorted Billy. "I highly doubt that." He walked over and gestured at his face. "Well come on and get it over with."

Nancy raised an eyebrow.

"Don't tell me you forgot. Come on, we both promised we'd keep fighting if only so you could give me a proper slap in the real world."

"Oh, of course," Nancy laughed as she sat up straighter.

Everyone looked at them with curious eyes, clearly wondering exactly how this was going to go and probably trying to figure out exactly how this promise of slapping Billy once awake had come about. Billy had his eyes closed and had taken a step forward, clearly ready for a rather hard hit. It was somewhat amusing but even more so as Nancy lightly patted his cheek instead. He peaked at her with one eye and with that, Nancy pulled him into a tight hug.

It was different. She'd realized as she'd kissed Jonathan that the dark place didn't really have the feeling of touch, the act more like a memory than something physical. But holding Billy was different because she'd only really interacted with him in the dark place. They didn't have any past experiences together besides it and she could feel that this was the first time they were really holding each other.

She didn't think about the stories of before and all the things she'd heard about him. She thought about what she'd learned about him in the dark place, how she'd come to see him as a teenager just like any of them, and she thought about the little bits of information Eleven had told her after he'd woken up.

Nancy realized she saw him as a friend, a confidant in their shared experience. Just as she'd held him and tried to calm him down when he'd feared that he'd be trapped in the dark place, Nancy could now feel the dynamic of the embrace change. She was crying as seeing him was the final piece she'd needed to know she was out. His grip

tightened even as he trembled too and Nancy held on tight. She was safe now. Finally.

---

Billy felt good. He felt better than he had in...forever. Well except maybe his fifth birthday when his dad hadn't started hitting him yet and bought him ice cream and the Evel Knievel Stunt Cycle. Back before he'd grown to really hate the man. But excluding his father, nothing else was weighing on his mind now. He'd survived fucking surgery and had the damn cast off. For once he wasn't pissed at Max and he'd stopped thinking about Lucas as some threat. Anything crazy and supernatural was over and done with, Nancy was back and safe, and his birthday was coming in two more weeks and then no matter what happened, he really would be free from his father and this shit-hole town.

He propped his feet up on the dashboard and let out a satisfied sigh. The only thing missing was a good cigarette.

"Hey! Put your feet down," muttered Steve as he swatted at him.

"No," Billy evenly responded.

"You're getting prints on the glass," grumbled Steve.

"And what are you going to do? You're driving."

"Uh," Dustin murmured from the backseat, "if you're going to strangle each other do you mind waiting until you've already dropped me off?"

"Strangling isn't really my thing," Billy replied just as Max hit him upside the head. "Hey you little twerp!"

"Don't worry, he's only kidding," sighed Max. "Besides, cast or no cast your leg is still healing and Steve still has a very nice bat."

"Speaking of that, I've always wondered what the hell your parents said about it," Billy said.

"They haven't seen it," snorted Steve. "I probably would've been tossed in an asylum if they had. Usually keep it in my trunk but I've

been keeping it in the house for now since they're not home. You never can be too ready."

"That's smart," Billy sighed.

"Hold up!" yelled Dustin. "Did you seriously just compliment Steve!?"

"I wouldn't exactly say it's a compliment that he's not a moron. That should just be a baseline for everyone."

"Well I guess I'll take what I can get," snorted Steve. "Thanks Billy."

"Are you sure we're not in an alternate universe?" asked Dustin "This is really starting to feel like one."

Max laughed. "Billy can be polite on occasion. Can't you?"

"It's called being a damn good actor."

Steve rolled his eyes. "I feel less complimented now but I'll still take it."

"Needy much?" laughed Billy.

"I'm not responding to that."

Dustin just shook his head like he was expecting to wake up from a coma while Max and Billy laughed at Steve's semi-amused look.

Billy couldn't help but also shake his head like he was in a coma or a dream. Here he was in a car with fucking Harrington, teasing him and laughing with Max and one of her friends in the backseat. He had to hand it to the chatterbox, it did feel like an alternate universe. But then, that's kind of what everything had been feeling like since getting stuck in the dark place.

After all, despite all the times that Steve could have taken a crack at him, could have taken advantage of the situation and put him down or got even with him, he hadn't. Instead he'd said words that no one had told Billy despite all the moments he'd needed to hear them. Steve had been kind when no one else would have but still wasn't afraid to push Billy when he knew he needed to.

Who would have thought he'd get that kind of understanding from Steve of all people.

Billy supposed he should thank the heavens it was Nancy he got stuck with and not Steve or Jonathan or even the Chief. It was only because of Nancy and her willingness to talk to him and sit down and even try to understand him that he hadn't wanted to punch Steve right away once waking up.

That was kind of his feeling with everyone out of this strange group. Whenever any major annoyance started to rise up in him, or when he looked at Steve or Jonathan and wanted to sock them in the jaw, he thought of those stories Nancy had told him. All those moments when these teens and kids had pushed aside their normal lives, sometimes because there was no other choice, but so often because it was just the right thing to do and it again just made Billy realize how small his old world and his old problems were.

He still wouldn't have ever wished Nancy to end up in the dark place but in retrospect, he was thankful it had been her. He certainly didn't feel any pointless hatred or stupid jealousy towards Steve partially thanks to seeing Nancy's version of him. It was getting to hear those words that let Billy remain relaxed throughout the rest of the drive home.

They dropped Dustin off, Steve sticking around to make sure he could sneak back inside, and then went back to Steve's home. As they walked in, Max asked, "Can we get Nancy and Jonathan over some time?"

"Yeah? Wouldn't be a half bad idea."

"We could make lunch!" Max quickly added. "You know...before things get too serious again."

Steve looked over to Billy and then Max to him and finally Billy cried, "What?!"

"Well, would you have a problem with it?" asked Steve.

And again, there went Steve fucking Harrington just utterly blowing

him away and not rising to any bait that Billy left behind. "It's your house," he snorted.

"Yeah but you're the guests and—"

"I don't care," sighed Billy with a wave of his hand. "Jonathan's creepy as hell in my opinion but yeah, whatever. Bring them over for fucking lunch."

"And you'll help?" asked Max.

Billy let out a slight groan but to be perfectly honest, he couldn't say no when Max looked at him like that. Not if he wanted to actually make their most recent conversations still hold any meaning. "Fine! Just warn me beforehand. I'm gonna go pass out."

He glanced over at Steve on the way to the stairs and the look that he got back... Billy shook off the feeling. Again, just Steve fucking Harrington and his fucking big heart being so fucking good and kind to everyone, even to someone like him.

Billy shook his head and walked up the stairs. He still had no idea how Nancy could have let that go.

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Jane watched the tender moment, relief welling up in her that now Billy and Nancy were safe. Hopper had talked with her frequently and she understood he was trying to be helpful, assuring her that none of this had been her fault. However, it was so much easier believing now that she wasn't forced to worry about their well-being.

After Nancy and Billy's hug, the others seemed to surge forward again. They enveloped her with hugs and kisses and kind words as Billy took a step back from the group and Max did the same thing. Jane watched as Max reached out and took his hand in a tight grasp.

Jane had seen Max once when Steve had visited Nancy and she understood what had happened with her parents. Hopper told her little, saying, "it's not good to gossip about things like this behind people's backs" but Jane knew that the two siblings were hurting from their Papa. She knew what that was like and because this was

her first time seeing Billy since she'd found out, she walked over and hugged them both while the rest of her friends held onto Nancy.

Billy looked down at her, a bit surprised by her actions but Max quickly hugged her back and slowly Billy relaxed too. Jane looked up and she could tell Billy understood the connection, likely taking the information he'd learned from others and applying it to now. He ruffled her hair and Jane decided she didn't dislike him anymore. Her initial interaction with him hadn't been great, kind of like with Max, but Jane decided that they both deserved to be in their group just as much as the others and she hugged them tight to remind them of that.

After the raw emotions were let out a little more, Joyce and Hopper mentioned that everyone else needed to be taken home. It was twelve o'clock at night and all the kids except for Will were missing from bed and it wouldn't do Hopper any good to get a call from three panicked sets of parents.

With everyone reluctantly agreeing and Jonathan still promising to stay with Nancy for the night, everyone else started to leave and Hopper clapped Jonathan on the back. "Be fine without us kid?"

"Yeah, we'll be good," Jonathan replied with a slight smile. "Go home. I'm sure Jane would like that."

"Sound good kiddo?" asked Hopper.

Jane nodded, smiling up at him as they headed out of the Lab. It did feel good, realizing that there was no urgency to come back to this place. She was free from the Lab and Nancy was back. It was all done and she'd soon be starting school and starting something new.

To celebrate Nancy waking up, Hopper let her have three Eggos all to herself once back at the cabin. It was definitely far too many but Jane grinned and didn't ask questions. It felt good to finally be out of the Lab with no need for her to go back. She'd surprisingly hadn't hated Dr. Owens and it helped that Hopper clearly trusted him but Jane was glad to be out.

"Once this whole quarantine thing is over, I think it's about time to

really introduce you to the town,” said Hopper. “And we’ll have your schedule about a week before school starts.”

Jane knew that the others complained about school all the time. It had always felt like some inside joke only now Jane realized she’d get to experience it too. It didn’t matter how much everyone else whined about it, Jane was just excited to be able to understand what they were talking about.

“School,” she agreed with a large smile.

Hopper laughed. “I think you’ll enjoy it too.”

It was fairly late so not long after that they went to bed and Jane felt like she could really relax. She slipped into sleep and—

Reaching out and wanting to survive. She felt them, more of them and...they were larger and stretched farther than simple plants in the woods. Those were just the fingers, touching whatever they could, gathering information. They grasped at it, pulling themselves forward, moving through her and out.

She was the cut out form in glass, the feelings passing through her, through the dark place and into their world. They weren’t leaving their home though. They were leaving another place, much like their own, copies disappearing into black smoke having taken advantage of all they could in that world. Now their hands and arms were being pulled to their fingers. It didn’t matter that the fungus was destroyed, it didn’t matter who was awake if anyone. They followed the trail left by their own immaterial bodies, pulled away from their rot and destruction and—

“Jane! El wake up! It’s alright! It’s alright!”

She shot upwards and grabbed hold of Hopper as she cried into his shirt. Fear shot through her as she held on as tightly as she could.

“It was just a bad dream. It’s ok. I’m here. I’m here,” Hopper murmured. He repeated other phrases that were meant to be comforting and during other bad dreams they were. She knew she could hold onto Hopper and everything would be alright.



That feeling of safety and security wasn't there though. Not this time.

"Not ok," murmured Jane. "Not."

"What do you mean? Of course it is! It was just a dream—"

"No. Not dream," interrupted Jane through tear filled eyes. "Not over. It's not."

## 7. Phone Call

### Notes for the Chapter:

And here's the next chapter! With school done and the holidays finally over, I can really sit down and write a lot. Because of that, the next chapter will definitely take less than a week. Not sure how long but maybe three or four days before I can publish it so yay for that! Thank you all for reading this and I hope you enjoy <3

"I'm afraid this is becoming a habit," sighed Dr. Owens.

Jim rubbed his eyes tiredly. They were sitting on the side of the road in his truck again and neither were in a good mood, Jim doubly so. He'd stayed up all night just trying to calm Jane down so that she'd go back to sleep. After that, he'd paced round and round the cabin. He'd tried to push the idea that it had all been a bad dream but the idea didn't take. She'd fallen asleep more from exhaustion, not any real comfort he'd managed to provide.

He'd gotten some of the kids to come over, Mike and Will, since he figured the last thing she wanted was to be alone. Then he'd called up Dr. Owens and asked, "Still on for those lunch plans?"

Though Dr. Owens had only responded with, "I'm assuming you're still picking me up?" the utter exhaustion and want to sigh had been pretty clear.

A car passed by, definitely going over the speed limit, but Jim ignored it. "I don't know if the people will stand for an extended quarantine. They're stuck here and all that irritability is going to blow sooner rather than later."

"Well in that case, we're on the same page. The government doesn't see a reason for a longer quarantine, not unless a severe cause is found."

"I can't do it. Not again," sighed Jim. "I can't go lying to everyone,

just being a god damn pawn for you people while you do god knows what. It puts Jane in too much danger.”

Dr. Owens rubbed his eyes tiredly. “The scientist in me wants to put this place into a box and study just how this entire environment can be so damn unlucky with the unknown. But there are too many lives that could be affected. Not just here but in other small towns, other countries if our government got a hold of these things and found a way to weaponize them. I can’t trust them to not do that.”

Jim laughed. “Glad to know you’re becoming as paranoid as me.”

Dr. Owens groaned and let his head fall back against the seat. “I wish I’d never taken the job to begin with.”

“Well I’m glad you did Doc,” Jim said as he clapped him on the shoulder. “No idea who I’d be dealing with now if you hadn’t shown up.”

“That’s fair enough,” sighed Dr. Owens. “So what do we do now?”

“That’s what I’m asking you. You have a way to eradicate these things for good?”

“We’re still making sure Ms. Wheeler doesn’t relapse or have dire side effects. But should we find nothing, we’ve formulated how wide spread this thing could have become in between January when Mr. Hargrove first got infected to now. We tracked migration patterns of animals in and out of the area, have had tech guys going over records to figure out where people have come and gone. Thankfully your town isn’t too much of a tourist trap,” sighed Dr. Owens. “With all that figured out, we have a variable radius of how widespread this has become. It helps that the latching onto the host and transformation into an incubator for further fungi is so slow or this could be a lot worse.”

“So what? You’re going to spread the stuff you gave to Nancy throughout the population? How the hell is that going to work?”

“Contaminate food and water supplies, have planes drop it from the atmosphere,” Dr. Owens replied. “It won’t be too difficult. The

government has given me a rather lax rope in this since those that know think it's just an after effect of the Upside Down and no one wants to deal with that after the carnage that happened last time. For now, they simply expect me to assure them of its eradication and then pack up and leave."

"It's pretty damn freaky how easily that all rolled off your tongue."

"Well it's the truth. But if something else is coming...something more intelligent..."

"Any chance destroying all the fungi will keep the thing at bay?"

"I may have a doctorate but that certainly doesn't make me an expert in all things other worldly," replied Dr. Owens. "From the sounds of it, this is another creature from another dimension and attacking the fungi won't do much. We need to find the gate it's coming through and how it came to be."

Jim's mind fell on Jane. "Do you think..."

"I'm honestly not sure. From the reports I read, she could have killed herself opening that first gate and though she was stronger when she closed it, she was also more aware of her powers. She stopped the Mind Flayer with intent, not out of panic and confusion. But after the dream that she had...there is a connection to her. That I would stake my life on."

"That's what I was afraid to hear," sighed Jim. "She shouldn't have to go back to that damn Lab again. She deserves the chance to be a normal kid!"

"She does but...I'll explore other avenues. I'll try to see what else can be found, what tests can be done to the fungi and the general environment to see if we can find where this thing is going to come through but...she may be our only option. Do the others know?"

"No, I've asked Jane to keep it quiet for now. Not lying just...we don't want to give people the wrong impression. If I'm being perfectly honest, I was hoping you'd tell me it was just a bad dream and leave it at that."

"I wish I could. But the level of detail she described...the fact that this could be something completely new...I just can't make that promise."

"I know. I get it. Do you want me to try and keep this quiet for a moment longer?" asked Jim.

"Those kids seem to find out everything no matter what the adults decide," snorted Dr. Owens, "but if only to give them a break, I would hide it for a moment longer. Besides, there's no point in them worrying when we still have no idea what it is or what we can do."

Hopper nodded in agreement. "Copy that."

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It turned out Nancy and Jonathan came around quicker than Billy had expected. Apparently Nancy wasn't really back in the world and her parents still didn't know she and Jonathan were ok but Dr. Owens had given her a free pass for a day. Billy was a bit peeved that the Doc hadn't done anything like that for him, but he supposed if someone did spot Nancy, an abusive bastard wouldn't be tracking her down and trying to kill her. That and she got lucky with not having to worry about throwing up those pods since the drugs had let them pass through her system.

Two days had passed since Nancy woke up and yesterday she'd passed the news onto Steve that she could come over if they still wanted her to. That was why Billy found himself, Steve, and Max standing in the kitchen and making an all around American lunch.

It sure as hell wasn't anything special and none of them were exactly great cooks. Steve was only successful with making things look serviceable thanks to him following the directions. Billy wasn't too keen on directions though and he couldn't help but grin as Max followed suit.

"That's too many peppers!" Steve cried. He'd had his back turned as she'd completely chopped up the vegetable and dumped the entire thing into the pan. He fished out one of the harder looking parts. "Is that the stem?!"

“You said to cut it all up,” Max shrugged. “I thought you could eat it. You know, like the leaves of a strawberry.”

“Who the hell eats that?”

“Blame Billy,” Max responded. “He’s the one who got me doing it. Just shove the whole thing in your mouth. You don’t even have to worry about cutting it then.”

Billy shot her a glare. “You little rat,” he said. The heat behind the look wasn’t even half as angry as it usually would be though, if Billy could even call it anger. It felt more like teasing and though it was damn weird, it felt good too.

He wasn’t trying to protect her from his dad, not in all the wrong ways like he’d done before. Sure, they were forced together because of a really shitty situation but there were other connections Billy was focusing on and other reasons as to why he was even bothering with this. He’d always felt like his childhood had disappeared the moment his father had started hitting him, that he’d just had to harden up and tell everyone to fuck off so they didn’t have the chance of falling into the path of his father’s rage.

There wasn’t that need though, not anymore and with high school well and done with, Billy really didn’t feel like there was anyone to try and impress. He’d been on the basketball team for a time and yeah, he’d utterly creamed Harrington on plenty of occasions and had gotten in well with the top dogs, but hell! Steve was right about all that stuff seeming so pointless now.

Billy had always thought he’d needed to be in charge at school, to please people with his looks and charm and power and to beat up those that didn’t listen. It gave him the kind of control that he’d always lacked at home. But he’d never needed that. It had just made him a shittier person. He knew that now.

This...this was what he needed.

The sudden kick in the back of the leg was less needed though. “Hey!” he yelled.

“Stop zoning out. You’re going to cut your finger off,” chided Steve as he turned back to his own work. Billy wasn’t ready to ignore the attack though and took the spoon out of the mayonnaise jar. Before Steve could turn back around, he lugged the contents at the back of Steve’s head.

“Seriously!”

Max laughed and reached for the mustard bottle before Steve quickly snatched it from her. “Oh no,” he said, “we are not starting a food fight in the kitchen.”

Billy spooned out another glob of mayo and held it up. “What? Afraid you’d lose? We do out-number you two to one.”

“More like one and a half.”

And for that, Billy could proudly say Max had the proper response. She grabbed a handful of juicy tomato seeds that had collected in the sink and launched them.

“Alright! Now you’ve done it!” Without any hesitation, Steve popped the mustard bottle open and squirted it at both of them as Max and Billy dived to find anything to throw back. It went on for so long that the oven finished counting down and dinged, signaling it was done pre-heating and making everyone pause with the mashed up food in their hands.

Billy looked around the mess of a kitchen. “Well it was your fault Harrington.”

Steve groaned which had both Billy and Max laughing as they eventually agreed to a truce and started to clean up as Steve left to wash the mayo out of his hair and change his clothes. He came back looking a lot like a wet dog and it had Billy falling into a fit of laughter all over again.

Somehow, they managed to stay mostly on track after that as they got the cut potatoes in the oven, started cooking the mix for the Sloppy Joes, had the corn boiling, and Billy successfully finishing mixing up the potato salad.

“I’m gonna change and then set the table,” Max said, disappearing around the corner. Billy nodded and went back to cleaning while Steve kept an eye on all the timers.

Billy let out a tired huff as one patch of mustard seemed determined to remain stained on the cabinet door.

“It’s your own fault for starting it,” Steve smirked.

“Actually, it was you. So how about you come down here and clean your own damn kitchen huh?”

“And risk you forgetting the timers and burning everything? Not a chance.”

Billy snorted and focused back on trying to get everything out before it really did stain as Max came back and grabbed all the plates and utensils. Once the food was done cooking and the kitchen more respectable looking, Billy started to dish out servings while Steve kept an eye on the shimmering meat and Max started to get out some glasses.

The doorbell rang and Steve turned off the stovetop and wiped his hands. “That should be them. I’ll be right back.”

As Steve walked out towards the living room, Billy looked around and suddenly found that he couldn’t swallow. He’d just finished making lunch for...co-conspirators? The AA version for victims of the supernatural? Fucking friends? Despite how he knew he’d begun to change, that he’d started to really care for Max and that he’d become a part of this odd group even with his initial hatred for a lot of the members, it was kind of hitting him that this was what normal people did. Not the whole fighting monsters thing but the whole doing things for others. Normal people smiled and did food fights and teased and suddenly a crawling sensation wouldn’t leave his skin. So many little things that Billy had always wanted and now...he felt like he was going to wake up. Even the dark place hadn’t been real. He’d just wake up in bed with his dad coming in to yell and beat him and

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“Billy. It’s ok to have friends. You know that, right?”



Billy looked down to where Max had grabbed his hand. "Yeah, I fucking know that," mumbled Billy. "I'm not a moron."

"If that's the case, try not to act like one." She squeezed his hand and continued to look at him with knowing eyes. "Don't try to go out of your way to ruin this. It's ok to be happy."

"Huh. Is that what this gross feeling in my stomach is."

Max rolled her eyes. "Don't be so dramatic. Come on."

"Tell them I'll be right down. I never did get around to changing my clothes," chuckled Billy.

"Yeah, that is a good idea. You looked like a grocery store threw-up on you."

Billy laughed at that, ruffled her hair, and then quickly rushed up the stairs to grab a new change of clothes. He got to pull on a pair of jeans-fucking finally! It felt good to have that cast off. Then he grabbed a new tank top and went back down the stairs, taking each step two at a time. He was still barefoot and he blamed his comfortableness with that on the fact that he'd been wearing a cast for so long. Hell, he was starting to act like he lived here. But again, he had to admit it was nice feeling so comfortable. He hadn't even felt that in his own home.

"Jonathan," he simply said as he came face to face with the guy at the bottom of the stairs.

"Billy."

Jonathan just looked at him and Billy shrugged. What the hell was he supposed to say? Sure, he'd caved into Max but out of everyone here, he was least familiar with the elder Byers. Before things could get awkward though, Nancy was suddenly moving around him and gave Billy a tight hug. "Hey," she said.

"Hey yourself," Billy replied. "It's good to see you out of that hospital gown."

Jonathan made a noise in the back of his throat.

“Take a chill pill Byers boy. Not my type,” laughed Billy as he slapped Jonathan on the shoulder and went into the dining room, the two following behind him.

Max came up to them and they both gave her a quick hug as Steve pointed out the burger buns and condiments out on the table.

“You actually cooked,” Nancy said, delight and wonder in her eyes.

“With our help,” Max piped up.

“More like not,” snorted Steve. “I would have had it ready twenty minutes ago if not for these two.”

“Well, in that case, it’s perfect that they helped,” laughed Nancy. “We would have been late otherwise.”

Billy fist bumped Max as Steve rolled his eyes. “Yeah, what would I have done without them,” Steve snorted. He sat down and everyone else followed, the jokes easing as he then asked, “How are you Nancy?”

“Fine. You saw me yesterday,” she chuckled.

“I know. It’s just...”

“It’s fine Steve. I get it,” Nancy quickly said. “So let’s ignore the evil fungi and other dimensions for now and just have a good time.”

“Glad to see I’m not the only one with sense here,” replied Billy as he popped a fry into his mouth. “Not half bad if I do say-so myself.”

Jonathan’s lips twitched up into a smile and they all leaned forward, grabbing what they could and digging in. Billy cracked a joke here and there but for the most part he just watched. Despite all his time spent with these three individually, this was really the first time he got to see all of them interact.

When Nancy had first told him that Steve was still basically her best friend and somehow him and Byers had become friends despite Byers beating the shit out of him well...Billy had been a bit weirded out by it. Just hearing about their whole dynamic seemed off and yet here

the three of them were. It was obvious how much Steve still cared for Nancy but it definitely didn't feel like he was trying to step on Jonathan's turf and it was equally clear that Jonathan didn't feel threatened by him.

Max made sure she was included on the discussion despite being the youngest and after a few tall tales and more jokes were told, Nancy, being the big sister that she was, ended up giving out some advice on high school that Jonathan, Steve, and Billy all either agreed with, argued against, or laughed at.

"Don't punch a teacher," Billy added. "That usually doesn't end well."

"I'd like to imagine that's common sense," sighed Jonathan.

"They'd have to be a really big ass for me to do that," Max said with a completely serious tone.

"Don't punch any teacher," Steve stressed.

"Well, I mean if they try to hit you then I suppose you should hit back," Nancy mused.

"Just know that assigning a lot of homework doesn't give you that right," Jonathan quickly said.

"Yeah, I'm not an idiot," Max said with a roll of her eyes. "Besides, if the need becomes too much, I have plenty of friends to hold me back."

"That's good. No one ever really held me back," Billy absently said as Jonathan let out an exaggerated sigh.

They continued on like that for a moment longer when Nancy mentioned again how boring the Lab was. Max immediately perked up and talked about the game of Trivial Pursuit that Dustin had left over for her.

"I'm not very good at that game," Nancy admitted.

"I think that's the point," laughed Steve. "Let's see how poorly we can do."

They quickly shoved the leftovers into the fridge and then headed into the living room where Max started to set up the board and got out the cards. Billy waved away the idea of playing, more interested in watching everyone else so Nancy and Jonathan decided to team up against Max and Steve.

Billy laughed at how poorly everyone started out doing and it quickly devolved into what was the most ridiculous answer that could be given, not always the right one. Max grinned the entire game and Billy felt happy simply because she was too. Nancy sat with her legs crossed and every time she got something right, a soft smile would show and if she couldn't figure out an answer, that smile changed to an adorably confused pout. Jonathan, who seemed to permanently hide behind his bangs, actually looked up with small smiles and slight shakes of the head to signal that what someone had said was or wasn't right. As for Steve, he raised a fist in the air with a large toothy grin every time he got it right no matter if it was his turn or not.

It was nice and Billy thought about the family sitcoms on TV, the cute movies advertised with wholesome families and pure friends whose problems were practically laughable when compared to the real world. That's what this felt like, some scene that would end and then they would all stop playing these cardboard cutout roles. The lights would drop and the false ceiling would be revealed.

Part of his mind understood that Steve wasn't putting on a show. Max wasn't forcing the smile. This was what people did. They distracted themselves from the real world with jokes that didn't have someone else as the punch line. The happiness was from being around friends and this makeshift family. It wasn't a lie.

And Billy felt that. He felt like he was a part of something here and that each smile that graced his lips was more genuine than any that he'd shown before. Right here, sitting in Steve's living room and playing the stupid board game that he thought was easy but everyone else clearly sucked at, felt good. But it was that feeling of comfort which had him waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Anything in his life that had made him feel safe had always been stripped away or been revealed to be a lie. Why wouldn't the same

thing occur here?

He recalled Max's words, about it being ok to have friends and to not screw this up but Billy's mind focused on that less and less as the minutes ticked by. All he could think of was how there had to be a fall. The floor would give way eventually—

Billy jolted as the phone suddenly rang. Everyone had the same look of shock on their faces except Steve who just rolled his eyes.

"It's probably my parents. They do try to call every week. If they remember," Steve sighed as he got up and walked over to the phone right by the stairs.

Everyone turned back to the question Jonathan had just gotten, trying to give Steve some privacy as they focused back on the game. Their heads were soon whipping around though, Steve's first words showing them all that it definitely wasn't his parents on the line.

"Uh...yeah it is. I mean-yes. Yes this is Steve Harrington. May I ask why you're calling Mr. Hargrove?"

Billy froze. The temperature seemed to drop several degrees as no one moved.

"Yes...yes I understand sir. Well no. No he actually beat my faced in so I wouldn't exactly call us friends." A forced chuckle. A laugh that sounded almost too real. "If he's still in the area I think you'd have better luck with Tommy H. No, that's just what everyone calls him. His last name is Hart. Yes sir. Should be right after my name in this year's school directory. I remember Billy and him hanging out a fair bit. Certainly more than I ever did with him."

Billy could feel his throat closing up. His breathing was starting to become erratic and the hand Nancy placed over his didn't help in the slightest.

"Why now? If you don't mind me asking of course. Hmm...yes I do believe I heard something about that. Hard not to in a small town," Steve said with a nod. "Yes I'm sure he was a terrible influence on her sir. But Mrs. Hargrove doesn't believe that? She thinks he

kidnapped her? No, no I completely understand. A woman won't think about this logically. I'm sure she still sees Maxine as an innocent in all this. Of course. Yes I'll keep an eye out for her too."

This was the rug being pulled out from under Billy. Everything started to fade away as the singular knowledge that it had all been a lie started to circle through his head.

"Yes sir. My condolences for what's happened. I'm sure they'll both be found and charged. No, it's no trouble. I'll call you first if I find them," Steve said. "It's a family matter first and foremost. I get that."

He'd just said it. He'd just admitted to all of Billy's fears and now Billy was truly panicking. The only reason he wasn't running was because his legs and arms were locked up, frozen in place as he was unable to feel the hands trying to shake him out of it.

A small part of Billy's brain was trying to rationalize it. His father was dangerous and Steve was going the safe route by playing along to try and not arouse any suspicion.

But just as that thought came up, it was squelched by a million versions of 'it had all been a lie'. Why wait this long? Why save his life just to throw it away again? This was all some horrid joke and Billy was at the brunt end of it, wasn't he? The times when Steve had been patient and kind despite having no reason to be, well this was his reason.

To pull the cruelest gag he could, to truly get back at Billy for every wrong he'd done.

It was well played. For a moment, Billy had thought he could become better, that his life didn't have to be dictated by his father. He'd thought that his relationship with Max could actually become the brother-sister relationship it should have started out as and he'd thought that people existed that actually cared for him.

He'd thought that he'd found a place where he could be open about his fears, a place where he could cry and not be hit harder for it, a place where he could show some actual emotion.

And now that safety was gone again. Burned up in a second as words passed through his mind, phrases said by his father that he now knew to be true. He was worthless. No one could ever care about him. No one ever would. He had no one! No one but his father!

“It’s no trouble at all sir. Yes, I completely understand. My pleasure. Good day Mr. Hargrove.”

Billy’s vision was starting to go spotty. He really couldn’t breathe, the noise around him dulling until—

“Hey! Hey look at me! Billy, it’s ok!”

He blinked and Steve was right there, kneeling in front of him. What was he going to do? Laugh at how fucking gullible Billy had become? He was pathetic. Steve had to see that and now he wanted to gloat over how well he’d pulled the wool over Billy’s eyes.

Billy tried looking away. He couldn’t look in those eyes that had helped him through that bad dream and had let him cry against his shirt. He couldn’t look at what he’d remembered as kind only to see utter contempt.

But it looked like Steve wasn’t even going to give him that break. His hands stayed on the sides of Billy’s face and he forced him to look up again.

“Billy! I was just playing along, ok? I didn’t mean any of that.”

Didn’t...no it was just another lie! He wouldn’t fall for this again!

“I’m not going to give you up. None of us are,” hissed Steve.

Billy finally breathed in but it was shallow, only enough to push out, “You said—”

“I didn’t mean it. I swear! I’m not giving you up to that abusive asshole! Not ever!”

“But—”

“No! There’s no other side! If he came here right now I’d fight him

off! I swear to god I would for you and Max! I was just trying to get information, see if he knew anything more. He doesn't thank god," sighed Steve. "But I didn't mean any of it. You're still safe. You're safe here."

Billy looked into Steve's eyes. They were so close, foreheads practically touching. The fire behind Steve's eyes was inescapable at this distance.

"You're...sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," stressed Steve. "You're safe from here on out. Think of it as a safe house or a second home or whatever's easier but you are safe. That's a promise Billy. Got it? Just breathe...out...then in again. Yeah...yeah exactly like that. You're safe."

Billy was trembling, he couldn't quite stop it but perhaps it was better than acting as a frozen statue. He breathed in time with Steve's words and slowly everyone else started to filter back in. Nancy was holding him as was Max. And Max...she was trembling. Of course she was scared! But Billy had only been thinking about himself and what would happen to him. He hadn't thought about how all this affected Max too.

"I'm sorry," Billy whispered. When Max looked at him in confusion, he added, "I just made it about myself. Again. Sorry."

"He's fucking scary," Max said. This time not even Steve called her out on her language. "But he's not my dad. It's ok. This isn't about me."

Billy just closed his eyes and covered his face for a moment longer. He continued to breathe along with Steve for several more minutes until he looked up and away from him. Nancy rubbed his shoulder gently.

"We're your friends Billy," Nancy said. "Once this is over we're going to stop your father."

Jonathan nodded. He was the only one not right on top of Billy but his face conveyed the emotion that he wasn't comfortable enough



physically showing. Billy appreciated it just as much.

“So...he thinks Billy kidnapped me?” Max suddenly asked.

Steve snorted. “Your mom thinks that-sorry about what I said about her. I was just trying to keep on his good side. And Neil just thinks Billy was a bad influence on you and you ran off with him.”

“Not completely wrong,” sighed Max. She squeezed Billy’s hand. “Better?”

He nodded and continued to breathe in. A part of himself still doubted, still feared that his father would come in despite all of Steve’s reassurances. But now he was more in control and he managed not to break down again.

Billy looked around and tried to force his mind past its doubt as he looked at all those around him.

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Jane smiled at Will and Mike trying to appear as at ease as she could. When they’d visited right after the dream that was more, she’d been dead-set on the idea that something was coming. It was invasive and painful and all she could do was cry against Hopper all night until she’d passed out. Now that a few days had passed though and Mike and Will were bac, the overall fear was gone and she was more accepting of the idea that maybe it had simply been a dream.

Hopper had told her again and again that she needed to stay quiet about it. She didn’t have to lie but he wanted to make sure that there was or wasn’t a threat before everyone started getting scared. Jane could understand that. She didn’t want her friends to be afraid, especially not if they didn’t have to be. So much had happened and though Max had obviously been the most emotionally taxed, no one wanted to focus on another danger coming and so soon after they’d saved Nancy.

Because of that, Jane had admitted to having a bad dream and that day had passed. However, there seemed to be a different issue today as Mike leaned forward and felt her forehead.

"I think you have a fever," Mike said with a small frown.

"I'm not warm," Jane replied.

"Fevers are weird like that," Will quickly piped up. "And if you have a runny nose then you may have a cold."

Jane made a point by noisily sniffing. "Cold?"

"Have you never had a cold before?" asked Will.

Jane shook her head, confused by the use of the word. She felt cold despite Mike saying she wasn't but she didn't understand how you could have a fever and be cold at the same time.

"We don't mean cold like in 'brrr'," Mike said as he mimed the act of shivering on a cold day. "If you have a cold then you're sick. It's annoying but kids get sick like that all the time."

"Never sick."

"Never?" asked Will. "Not even a little bit?"

Jane shook her head. "Papa said I never got sick. Made him happy." Jane watched, always cautious about bringing up Papa around anyone. She hated him but at the same time, he'd been there for her longer than anyone else. Mike always bristled when she mentioned him, all her friends did except for Will and Max since they'd never really met him. The act was always comforting though. She liked seeing them care, seeing that physical reaction to wanting to help her.

"Maybe it's just because you're out in the real world now," Will said with a small shrug. "Or maybe they gave you things to keep you from getting sick and they're only just now wearing off."

Jane nodded. She didn't know for sure but she could easily follow Will's logic.

"Well, if it is a cold, you don't have to worry," Mike said as he squeezed her hand. "All you can do is deal with them and treat the symptoms—"

"Because it's a virus like Mr. Clarke said and viruses can't be cured," Will added with a matter-of-fact tone.

"Exactly. You'll be fine. The next few days may suck but it'll be ok," said Mike with another comforting pat.

Jane's lips twitched up at that, feeling a bit better now that they were here and comforting her. "Dustin?" she asked.

"He's with his mom. Family lunch. They do it once a week," Mike replied.

"And Lucas is at church. He should be out in about an hour though. We can go grab him if you want," Will said.

Jane nodded. She was still very tired and she definitely didn't like this cold thing but it was easier being with her friends.

"Skateboard."

"What about one?" asked Will.

"Max. She's been teaching me."

"Seriously? That's awesome!" Mike said. "You may want to rest a bit though before you go about exercising though. Do you have a skateboard?"

Jane shook her head. "Used Max's."

"We could convince Hopper to get her one," Will suggested.

"Or we can get you one," Mike said, "and have Hopper just deal with it."

Will rolled his eyes. "Or that."

"Skateboard," Jane agreed.

"Well when you're better, you can show us some of your moves," Mike grinned. "How does that sound?"

"It sounds good."

"Maybe you and Max could teach us too," Will murmured.

"Dustin wouldn't last five seconds," Mike laughed.

"True," Will smiled.

"Movie?" asked Jane.

"Oh yeah, I completely forgot we promised that," sighed Mike. He searched through his bag before pulling out the VHS. "It's totally a kids' film but since you missed out on it, Will and I thought it would be a good pick."

"It's a comedy," Will added. "You like those. Right?"

Jane nodded, perking up at the word.

"Alright, *Apple Dumpling Gang* it is," smirked Mike. He got up and put it into the recently added VCR that Hopper had gotten.

The three kids curled up on the couch, Will grabbing extra blankets for Jane. Pulling them closer, Jane felt far more comfortable and it was easier to distract herself with the film Mike had chosen. She could never really forget all that was going on. It left her feeling to vulnerable if she did. But momentary distractions like this were alright and as she leaned her head against Mike's shoulder, she truly felt safe again.

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Billy had wanted to get out of there. Having a fucking panic attack in front of everyone was so fucking embarrassing. Everyone kept looking at him like he was going to shatter and...yeah alright. He felt like he could shatter at any moment too but he didn't like how obvious it was to everyone else.

Nevertheless, Max had practically clung to him keeping him in the living room. He was too tired to shove her away and if he was being honest, he didn't really want to. He was sure Max knew all that though and had done it on purpose to keep him there. He wanted to be alone. At least he'd voiced that and yet still...

Damn the little twerp was smart. She seemed to know what he really

wanted despite how backwards his words were.

He'd tried to get away a few times but everyone had insistently pulled him back one way or another. At the very least they didn't really care that he was smoking in the room now. If he had to be around them, at least the cigarette distracted him from the awkwardness.

They were back to playing the game, obviously trying to re-create a sense of normality despite the somber mood that had fallen over everyone. Billy just listened to the questions as they started to go back and forth again. Before he'd just cracked jokes and rolled his eyes at their theatrics. Now he was a bit more irritated that they were so bad at the game. When it took them too long, he spouted out the answers, earning him a few surprised looks.

On the fourth time he did it, Jonathan said, "You've got to be cheating."

"My eyes are over here, not behind your back," Billy said with an exaggerated sigh. "It's not that hard."

"Not that...you've gotten every one right!" cried Nancy.

"You seriously didn't know who the fifth president of the US was?"

"No!" cried everyone in unison.

"Why the hell would we know that?" asked Steve. "It's not like it's useful information."

Billy snorted before he took another drag. "Considering how far you guys have gotten, I'd say it's pretty useful right now."

"Didn't you end up with a C in history or something?" asked Jonathan.

"I had one last time I remember being at school," Billy murmured. Before Nancy could get that heartbroken look on her face, he quickly said, "I just remember shit. Doesn't mean I can apply it or write a god damn essay but I remember stuff."

Max reached over and grabbed a card, making sure to hide it from Billy. "Who was the first female Prime Minister of the UK?"

"That's easy, Margaret Thatcher. And she's the first and obviously only female Prime Minister so far since she's still in office," replied Billy with a shrug. "Not exactly hard."

"How the hell would you learn that?" asked Steve.

"Saw her being sworn in on the TV in like...whenever that was," Billy said with a shrug.

"Well what about this one," Nancy said as she grabbed another card. "What company made the first colored arcade game?"

"Atari did with Tempest."

"You don't even like video games!" exclaimed Max.

"Doesn't mean all that information is automatically struck from my brain," snorted Billy.

"Here, what about this," Steve quickly said and suddenly it seemed Trivial Pursuit had turned into, let's question Billy's memory. For a split second he felt insulted, like they honestly didn't believe him. However, then it got a bit more exciting as he wracked his brain for any miniscule info he could remember. Of course, he didn't get every question right but he sure as hell was doing better than everyone else.

His joy started to grow again, truly becoming entertained as he easily showed them how to finish the game in a matter of minutes. He forgot about his father, if only for half an hour as the utter panic and dread became a memory rather than reality.

Max continued to cling to his side and though he felt better, her presence definitely didn't hinder.

The moment of peace couldn't last forever though and eventually Nancy glanced at a clock and murmured, "I should probably get back to the Lab. Owens didn't want me gone for too long. Still in the early stages since I woke up and all that."

“Yeah, of course,” Steve said. He jumped to his feet, clearly not pleased but understanding why she had to go.

“But before I leave, I nearly forgot I got something for you guys.”

Billy looked at Steve and then to Max but they were just as confused as him.

She walked over to her bag and pulled out a tape. “Mike told me Max hadn’t seen this and insisted that she should. I just promised to get it to her. Whether you let her watch it or not is up to you two,” chuckled Nancy.

Billy was closest so he took the tape, a large grin spreading across his face. “Oh hell yeah! Max, you’ve been wanting to see *Alien*?”

Steve let out a pitiful groan that had Billy smiling all the wider.

“Yes!” Max excitedly said. “You’re ok with that?”

“Hell yeah I am. I was twelve when I saw it. You’ll do fine,” Billy grinned. “Come on Steve? You’re not afraid are you?”

Steve just shook his head, unwilling to answer which was honestly even funnier.

Nancy rolled her eyes. “Not my thing but you guys have fun with it. Jonathan?”

“Yeah, we should get going,” he agreed. He nodded over to everyone as Nancy quickly went in to hug Billy.

“It’ll be ok,” she whispered. “It will.”

Billy didn’t respond because he couldn’t think of anything to say. At least nothing that wouldn’t have been considered rude or ungrateful. He couldn’t fully believe her. His life was just too closely aligned with bad luck. He still held her close though, gave a small nod, and then let her pull back when it was time. She said her goodbyes to Steve and Max, Jonathan continuing to be more distant and less hands-on.

With them gone, Billy's obligations to remain had vanished. It would probably be easier to run off to the spare room now. He was so god damn tired and the thought of his father started to infect his mind again. Without the chattering and laughter, his mind tried to drag him back to before. The doubt about Steve tried to resurface but before it could, he was right there beside him.

Steve slung an arm around Billy's shoulders and plucked the tape out of his hands. "So...I know I'm going to regret this...but if you guys are up for it then I guess we can do a movie night."

"Didn't you say you were scared of it?" Max asked with a wicked grin.

"Utterly terrified. But I'll suffer since you want to see it so badly and apparently you seem to think of it as some great masterpiece."

Billy snorted, suddenly feeling at ease again as Steve pulled him close. "Ridley Scott's a god damn genius! And Ripley is fucking badass. Besides, didn't you hear they're making a second one? It would be a disservice to Max keeping this from her."

Steve just shook his head. "I guess that's one way to put it. It's just too damn scary."

"Ah, don't worry Steve. I'll protect you," Billy sarcastically responded as he bumped his hip against Steve's. "You got popcorn? No way in hell we can have a movie night without that."

Steve rolled his eyes but headed over to the kitchen to find just that. Billy went upstairs with Max right behind him, setting up the TV so that they could press play the moment Steve came back in. Billy expected Steve to go and sit on Max's other side, they'd certainly left enough room for it. Instead he got on Billy's right and passed the bowl of popcorn over, clearly comfortable where he was.

It was kind of obvious what Steve was trying to do. He was trying to be kind and continue with the comfort he'd given earlier in the day. It was actually kind of funny as it was clear he needed the comforting once the movie got started.



To help, Billy talked through the movie, mostly answering Max's questions. He didn't mind since he'd seen the film before, even if it had been a while. Steve hadn't been joking when he'd talked about how it freaked him out. Billy swore he jumped more than Max when the chestbuster jumped out and he knew it was coming!

It was still fun though, Max becoming completely entranced as the action started to pick up and the threat became more real. He shouted with her at the screen, yelling things like "Fuck you alien scum!" and "Fuck yeah Ripley! Beat his ass!" It was fun cheering the heroine on and it seemed to make the whole experience less stressful for Steve as he seemed to focus more on what they said than the actual movie.

By the time it was over, the large bed was littered with crumbs and crap that they'd brought up from the kitchen every time they'd paused it. The popcorn bowl lay empty on the side dresser along with other wrappers and napkins scattered about.

"That was amazing!" Max cried as the credits rolled. "What happens next!? Did she make it!? Did someone pick her up!?"

"No idea," Billy grinned.

Max let out a tortured groan. "Are you serious? When's the next one coming out?!"

"Supposedly soon but it's still in the works. Probably won't be as good as this one. Sequels never are."

"I don't care. I just want to know what happens!"

Steve let out a tired laugh as he stretched from his position on the bed. "Well I'm glad someone liked it." He laughed again as Max let out a long yawn. "I don't understand how you're tired. I couldn't sleep for weeks after first seeing it."

Max shrugged. "Less scary when it's obviously a guy in a suit." She let out another long yawn. It was getting late and it had been a rather long day for everyone. Billy looked over at the mess surrounding them but it seemed Steve got the memo.

“Go on and sleep in my room for tonight. This needs to be cleaned up anyways.”

“Are you sure?” asked Max.

“Yeah, as long as you’re alright with it,” Steve said.

“Well I can help...”

“No need. You look like you’re going to pass out on your feet,” chuckled Steve. “Go on. It’s fine. We’ve got this.”

Billy nodded in agreement. “No trouble at all. I’m glad you enjoyed it though.”

Max grinned. “Me too. Night guys.”

“Night Max.”

She left with another large yawn as Steve stood up and looked over the mess. Since it had definitely been Billy’s fault too, at least some of it, he said, “I’ll get the trash if you want to strip it down for the washing machine.”

“Sounds good.”

Steve nodded and the two quickly went about cleaning up his parents’ bedroom. For a moment, Billy enjoyed just the simple tasks. It let him think about the movie and just all the other times he and Max had recently spent together. Before, he’d cared for her out of a sense of duty. And not even a noble one, just the duty of self-preservation, knowing he’d be punished as well if she were to step out of line as he tried to force her to see things like how his father did.

But now his world was far more than what his father had made it out to be and it was so much more complex than what Billy had planned for. Part of that included him actually caring for Max, for realizing the mistakes he’d made and seeing just how much his life could change from the kindness of others. Some days had been easier while others were absolute hell. Even the hell had purpose though as seeing how Max had been harmed by his father, seeing himself in her but

knowing that he hadn't had the people Max did, it definitely made him rethink his past actions.

And then of course his admittance to Max had changed everything. He'd been sure that would go to hell in a hand basket but it had somehow brought them closer. Max had been happy, taking it as a signal that he trusted her and Billy supposed he did. In some ways, it was out of necessity. She still understood more about this Upside Down thing than him. But he'd trusted her with something that could have just as easily stayed in the dark and Billy felt good about that.

He felt good about letting Max in and trusting her but even as that thought came to mind, the same couldn't be said for Steve. Or...it could. But it also really couldn't.

As Billy continued to clean, he thought about how it could have been so easy to fully collapse in the living room yet at the last moment Steve had grabbed him and held him tight and forced him to see he was telling the truth. Fucking Harrington, the guy he'd slammed his fist into and had never had any reason to trust him. He'd been forced to take him in, he sure as hell hadn't wanted to do it willingly, and yet here they were.

Steve had pulled him from the brink, and not just on this occasion. He hadn't done it because anyone had asked or because they all needed Billy to remain stable. It wasn't even like he thought it was easier dealing with a healing Billy rather than a purely emotionally raw one. No, Billy could see that he did it out of kindness and it was simultaneously one of the most admirable and yet fucking confusing things Billy had ever seen.

Steve was only a few weeks younger than himself and yet he took care of a bunch of kids, dealt with government scientists and supernatural dimensions, and still found time to try and help Billy. It was incredible and Billy started to wonder why someone so busy, someone who was pulled so thin already, would spend what little spare time he had on Billy.

No one had ever spent time with him unless they needed something from him. Not even his father. There had always been something the old man had wanted.

So why...why was Steve still standing by his side despite everything that had happened between them?

Billy couldn't lie to himself. It had felt good being held, looking at Steve and knowing wholeheartedly that in that moment he was safe. Steve had managed to push off the doubt, to prove that he was his friend, that they all were and they wouldn't betray him. Billy had accepted that but now new worries came to mind. What if they learned all there was to know about him? What if they knew him as Max did? No way would they all be forgiving and Harrington...rich, well-to-do, made to be King Harrington...well all his generosity would go out the window, wouldn't it? Steve could only be so kind. There was no way that kindness would continue if he found out.

It had felt so good, being held by him. It had been so god damn long since he'd been close to anyone that he found attractive in the slightest and then he thought about how it had been so god damn long since he'd really felt safe. To be perfectly honest, he couldn't even be sure if this really was what safe felt like because he'd never felt it before, but he imagined that it was close. Billy didn't feel like he had to look over his shoulder. He felt comfortable in that spare bed and had a fucking sister-a sister of all things-that he could count on.

He wanted to believe there was a connection there. The idea that he could actually reach out for someone...it was a near intoxicating thought.

But Billy's ultimate decision didn't come from that want.

He thought about all the possibilities that could occur, all the different paths that would lead to the inevitable disintegration of everything that had been built up over this strange and horrific ordeal.

Billy made his decision not on the good ideas in his mind but from the singular thought that his actions would finally end this continuing limbo. His doubt about Steve would be confirmed. Sure, he might still have Max but in general he'd be alone again and he could stop with this foolish thought of friendship and belonging.

That was what made Billy act as they finished cleaning.

Steve had already thrown everything into the washer. Billy had thrown the trash away and they'd both swept and vacuumed. Billy's entire thought process went through his head while they did this and he came to his decision once they came to the kitchen. As Steve put up some of the remaining leftovers, a feeling of cold indifference settled into Billy's stomach.

"Hey Steve."

Billy looked at him. God, he was so clueless to everything that was happening and for a split second, Billy just drank in that curious and kind look. It would be the last time Steve looked at him like that, the last time he cared. It was better though. At least that's what Billy forced himself to think. Now instead of waiting for the other shoe to drop, he could end it now.

Steve continued to look at him in confusion as Billy took the quick steps necessary. He closed the distance and grabbed Steve's hair before he could say anything more, forcing his lips against his. It was obvious the moment Steve's shock left him. For a few tense seconds Billy just held him against the kitchen counter. He moved his lips slightly just as Steve finally started to struggle and push him back. Billy let him, wiping at his mouth as he fully stepped away.

Billy could feel himself breaking inside. One look at Steve's face and he knew he was right. Well, at least he'd ended all this before it could get worse.

"Now you don't have to be conflicted about me," Billy murmured before suddenly rushing out of the kitchen and back to his room.

He'd planned to say more just to really get across the point of how laughable this all was. But when faced with Steve, Billy just couldn't do it. He slammed the door shut and covered his face with his hands.

Now that he'd done it, he immediately regretted it. Even now he couldn't escape his fucked up circle. He followed his own logic to an inescapable point and then suddenly regretted hurling himself over the edge despite there being no way to reverse gravity. Why regret

when there wasn't anything else he could do? It was ridiculous!

Billy kicked the dresser as hard as he could.

He'd screwed everything up, just as he'd hoped. He'd wanted Steve to hate him and now he surely would so why was he so angry? He should have just suffered in the Lab. Then he wouldn't have to be going through this. He could have pushed him away there.

Billy knocked a lamp off without thinking.

What if...what if Max had been faking all along too? What if he wouldn't even be able to hold onto that relationship now? His father had been right! He'd been fucking right like he always had been! All anyone had done was waste their time trying to get him out of the dark place. No one cared. They never had! Even with Nancy's sweet voice and kind touches...it was just lies!

Billy yelled and shoved the bed out of place before collapsing to the ground, his face falling into his hands again.

God, if his father was here now. Billy could imagine it so clearly, the cold laughter over how ridiculous this all was. Billy was never going to belong. He'd grown to understand that and for the split second he'd forgotten about it, he'd almost been happy. He could smile honestly with everyone, had felt not only safe but like he was a part of something that mattered, a group of people, a cause.

But it was all gone again because he didn't belong anywhere.

Billy's shoulders shook. He couldn't really stop it now. He'd wanted this ending and yet here he was beginning to cry over it. Christ he was so useless.

It was impossible to know how long he just sat there. It had to be sometime because his back was beginning to hurt from the hunched over position he was stuck in. He was surprised Steve hadn't come in earlier. He was going to throw him out, of course he would! Any other outcome was just foolish to think over. No more help, no more purpose or friends. He'd be thrown—

“Hey...don't...don't freak out. Ok?”

Billy didn't look up. At first he couldn't, trying to understand why he was being told not to freak out. Shouldn't it be the other way around?

"Max wanted to come in but I told her to go back to bed. Unless... unless you want her here instead of me. What...what do you need?"

What kind of question was that? Why was Steve acting like this? It didn't make sense! This wasn't what Billy had planned for.

"Can you just...Billy. Look at me."

Not commanding, not angry, just gentle and kind like it had been in the past few days. Despite his better judgment, he looked up to find Steve kneeling down in front of him again.

"Do you want me to get Max?" he repeated.

Billy stared, eyes wildly moving back and forth as he searched for the obvious. But the painting he'd made in his head didn't match the Steve in front of him. He shook his head, not able to speak.

"Ok. How about we let her sleep then? You really...well you really freaked her out."

Of course he had. That's all he could do. Terrify and disgust people. Upset the god damn balance of everything. "So fucking useless," Billy mumbled under his breath. He tried to look down and away again but then he felt those hands against his cheeks.

It was a mirror image of that morning, only now they were in the spare bedroom and not downstairs. Steve forced him to look up, grasp firm but still gentle as he held him there. Billy blinked and tried to force himself to ignore his own expectations. Already this wasn't going how he'd planned and he tried to understand what had changed.

Steve shook his head. "You're not useless Billy. And...ok yeah it is your fault Max got scared. You were yelling a hell of a lot and throwing shit but...it's also not your fault. Not about that but...well you understand right? If that makes sense."

Billy just stared. He didn't really get it. Everything he'd prepared himself for wasn't happening. Why?

"I'm serious. Alright? I'm not trying to mess with you or something."

Billy frowned. His eyes narrowed and he tried to understand. Steve's eyes...they were different but not full of disgust. They weren't exactly open and waiting either. He...he knew. So few words had passed between them yet somehow he just understood.

A deep, shaky breath escaped Billy's lips. He still couldn't bring himself to speak so he silently asked instead. He asked for some form of certainty, an answer that he couldn't somehow warp. He didn't think the answer would come. No, no matter what Steve did he'd know it would turn up wrong. There was no reason to believe him.

Billy waited to see if his question would be answered just as a fiery fierceness appeared in Steve's eyes. His hands changed, his left shifting to rest against Billy's neck as his right cupped his face rather than just resting there. His eyes slipped closed even as Billy couldn't bring himself to do the same. He just stared as a new question appeared in his mind: what?



## 8. They're Here

### Notes for the Chapter:

Been writing like crazy to try and get these chapters out as quickly as possible. A huge thank you to everyone and I hope you enjoy!

Steve could only stare.

He stared at an empty kitchen. Billy was gone and Steve could only try and understand what the hell had just happened. The only thing that got him moving was the sound of a door slamming. Mentally he still felt stuck, but his feet somehow still managed to get up the stairs. He could already hear Billy yelling, kicking things and crying out. Max was standing there, eyes wide and hands shaking.

“Go back to bed.”

“But what if he needs—”

“It’s ok Max. I’ll help him. Ok? You just go back to bed.”

“Are you sure?” whispered Max.

“Not now. You don’t have to carry everything yourself.”

“But about what happened...”

“I’ve got this,” he insisted. Steve gave her a comforting squeeze and pushed her back into his room. Only once the door was closed did he turn back to the spare room where he could still hear the occasional thing being thrown.

His head rested against the door.

Billy’s eyes, right before he’d made the move, had been hard. He’d been prepared, had already formulated what was going to occur. That much Steve could tell.

But why this? Why now?

Steve continued to rest there. He could tell Billy's anger had subsided when the loud bangs stopped occurring. There was silence for a bit before Steve could hear the crying.

He was so scared. Just like when he'd woken up from the dark place. Steve wanted to reach out but he forced himself to remain there. His mind looked over all the pieces that had just occurred and then the older pieces too. He thought of what he knew as fact and what could easily be inferred. Everything that he was seeing was connected. Steve had to remember that. Billy wasn't some unsolvable enigma with paths that abruptly ended or had impossible turns. For a while he'd wondered if he'd just been bad to be bad. There were certainly people like that, assholes who were just born, not created.

But Billy was more complex. Anger and sadness were just two of his emotions. They weren't who he was. Steve just had to think.

Carefully breathing in and out, pieces started to fall together and as they did, Steve started to think about himself as well. He thought about the day he'd murmured to his mother those carefully disguised words. Her words hadn't been helpful or cruel. They'd just been comforting but in a way that a kiss on the forehead from your mom is comforting after a hard fall. It didn't really help and it didn't really hinder. It was just a momentary way to ignore what was in front of you.

For Steve, his parents had ignored it and he hadn't had the courage to tell anyone else. He'd focused on girls, it was easier and wouldn't lead to arguments with his parents and he liked them just as well. All other feelings he'd pushed aside, only daring to ponder in the latest, loneliest nights.

It had sucked but...Steve wondered if it had been a blessing. In most of his thoughts about his parents, he'd always felt cheated somehow. They loved him but it had always been a hollow feeling, like they did it because it was something to do. They didn't mind doing it but it wasn't real interest in him or the things he liked. His father sometimes got angry, especially if he got drunk. He'd thrown something every now and then but he'd never hit Steve or his mom.

Again, a blessing when compared with Neil.

The connective tissue, Neil was it. Of course he was. He was so engrained in Billy's past that it was impossible to separate the two. Hopefully the same wouldn't be said for Billy's future. Maybe because Steve was beginning to understand it all...he could even help.

Steve understood why Billy had done it. Everything in his head finally clicked together about Billy, the beatings, being put into a hospital, his dad, his anger, that kiss. Steve understood and with that he pulled the door open.

It was difficult getting Billy to even look at him. When he finally spoke, it was with the same confidence as that kiss, a clear view of how all this was going to turn out. Steve needed to figure out a way to prove to Billy that he wasn't his father. Steve wasn't going to think of him like that and he wasn't going to punish him for it.

So with that promise, Steve went out on a limb and pulled himself close.

He went quick, not wanting to push any boundaries as Billy just stared at him with wide eyes.

"You're not...angry?"

The way Billy said it had Steve's heart breaking. At the same time though, it confirmed everything that he'd thought about when waiting outside.

"Why would I be angry?" Steve said with a kind smile. "I mean the kiss wasn't great-kind of helps if you ask permission first too-but I'm not going to be angry with you over it."

Billy couldn't appreciate the humor and just shook his head. Steve could tell he was going to try and get angry. He'd fill himself up with it, protect himself and force himself into the narrative he'd already chosen. Steve grabbed him though, keeping him from standing as Billy murmured, "Max maybe but-no. Not you Harrington. Why wouldn't you think—"

"Because it's not how I think," Steve evenly interrupted. He took a deep breath. This was scary for him as well. He'd never opened up

about this with anyone, not even Nancy who was arguably the most important person in his life. But he needed to do this for Billy if he wanted to show him that he wasn't alone. "You like guys. That's what I'm...guessing anyways. I do too."

"Bullshit."

Steve couldn't help but snort. What an utterly Billy thing to say. "It's not. And before you bring Nancy into this, that wasn't false either. I like both. Do you? I mean, you seemed to be a pretty big player so—"

"No."

Steve nodded encouragingly. He could tell that if he kept rambling then Billy would eventually interrupt him to try and shut him up. He still couldn't ask direct questions though. Better to allude to it with stories about himself. It seemed to be the best way to get Billy to answer anything.

"I never told my dad. My mom didn't believe it," sighed Steve. "I've...never told anyone at school. Some days have been worse than others and I mean, I've found the rare book or news article that reminds me I'm not alone but mostly I've just—"

"I didn't tell. He just found out," Billy bit back. It was impossible to ignore the pain in his voice.

"Shit that...yeah. I don't know what my father would have done if he ever found me like...well like that," sighed Steve. He'd guessed as much but hearing it was different, more bone chilling. Steve would like to imagine his father wouldn't have acted like Billy's but the fact that he couldn't know for sure was incredibly disheartening. "It's isolating and it sucks. But you're not alone. Not really."

Billy looked up with wide eyes. It was obvious he still didn't believe him. "Everyone else—"

"Listen, I can't speak for the entire world and from what I can tell, most people suck. But as far as this team, the kids and Nancy and Jonathan and Joyce and Hopper, they won't care. You wouldn't be looked down for it or kicked out. You still belong just as much as you

did yesterday.”

Billy wiped at his eyes and sniffed. “You haven’t told them.”

“I haven’t,” admitted Steve, “but I have faith in them. I know who they are and I know what bonds us is deeper and more meaningful than who the hell I like. Or who the hell you like. I’m not going to push you away Billy. I’m not going to...to toss you over to your dad like you think I will. You’re part of this family now and family sticks together.” Steve stood up and held out his hand. Hesitantly, Billy took it and Steve pulled him up. “Now go to the restroom and clean up your face while I fix the room. You look like shit.”

Billy laughed, rubbing his face again before peeking between his fingers. “Fucking mom Steve to the rescue huh?”

“You’re damn right. Now go,” Steve replied, waving him away.

Steve watched him go, waiting until he was out of the room before he turned back to survey the mess. Considering how out of hand Billy could get, this was fairly tame. There wasn’t any broken glass at least and it was mostly just a matter of putting everything back into place and righting the bed. By the time Billy was back, Steve had already finished. Billy looked just as vulnerable though and Steve slowly began to understand that a quick word or action, no matter how sound, wouldn’t change Billy’s mind on this. The kiss and the promises and the short stories might have been a temporary measure to keep Billy from breaking but they hadn’t actually changed his expectations.

“Were you lying?” Billy asked, looking down and away. He was trying to avoid looking at him again, still afraid of what he might find.

“I wasn’t lying. Sure as hell wouldn’t have kissed you if I wasn’t even a bit interested,” snorted Steve. Knowing that a more concrete action needed to be taken, he went with his next plan. He got down on the floor where he’d set an extra blanket and started to get situated. Billy looked on in confusion. Steve didn’t respond, waiting for Billy to ask what he clearly wanted to.

“Is there something I’m missing?” he slowly asked. “Your parents’ bed is empty still, right? Max is still in yours?”

Steve nodded and simply eased against the pillow on the ground. “You’re not alone,” he murmured, a yawn escaping his lips as he pulled his blanket up.

“Oh.”

Understanding popped up in Billy’s eyes. Steve was glad. Billy wasn’t big on taking anything directly, kindness or pity or just anything. Again, Steve just gave him an option and without trying to push him in any one direction. Billy didn’t say thanks which wasn’t surprising, it just wasn’t in his nature, but he did close the door, flick the lights off, and move over to his fixed bed.

Steve got situated and forced himself to try and get some sleep. He couldn’t believe that he’d had ‘that’ conversation with Billy of all people. In a way, it had been the first time he’d talked about it with anyone, his mom not really counting. Any fear of sharing was already gone though, all anxiety having been focused on Billy and making sure he truly knew he was safe.

It felt good telling someone an unknown truth of his. This whole thing with Billy being a part of their group had felt so weird and wrong in the beginning but now Steve felt like he was almost fighting to keep him there. He’d seen him vulnerable. He’d seen him kind. He’d seen what he could be and what he could become without his dad and if Steve held any power to keep him from becoming that, he would.

Maybe that was why he didn’t feel so scared about what he’d given up because he felt that by doing so, he could pull something good out of Billy.

“You awake?”

Steve rolled over and looked at the bed. “Yeah.”

“I can’t stop thinking.” Billy said it softly. He didn’t have to say about what. His tone, the fear, it was clear he was still too emotionally raw

to keep everything closed off. He was asking for a way out and Steve thought of a way.

He pushed himself up and lied back on the bed. Billy shifted slightly away as Steve just laid against the pillow.

“Nancy always hated sleeping alone after the first fight with the Upside Down,” murmured Steve. “I know sometimes Mike and her would camp out together. I always tried to make sure she didn’t feel alone, even on the darker nights. You’re not alone Billy. I’m right here.”

Steve stayed still after that, feeling the warmth of Billy and the sheets around him. He felt like he could fall asleep now, knowing that he’d done something good.

“Thank you.”

Steve froze for a split second before a large smile grew across his face. Billy couldn’t see it and in a way, that just made Steve’s smile grow wider. “You’re welcome Billy. Night.”

“Good night.”

---

Max lied back on Steve’s parents’ bed. She was back in the room after the rather erratic day when Nancy and Jonathan had come over. She got out her walkie-talkie and pulled out the antenna. She’d talked to Dustin about every other night, getting updates for when he and the rest of their friends couldn’t make it. She knew Jane was sick and that was her first question.

“Dustin are you there? This is Max. How’s Jane? Over,” she said.

“Hey Max! She’s still sick. We’re supposed to be going over there today. Over.”

“Still!”

Silence.

“You gotta say over. Over.”

“Ok, ok, sorry Dustin,” Max said with a roll of her eyes. “So she’s still sick? Over.”

“Yeah. Mike thinks it’s just because she’s never been sick before. You know, so she hasn’t built up an immunity to anything or whatever?” Dustin replied. “The Chief is getting worried but she’s not getting any worse. Just a bad cold. Over.”

“That’s good. Tell her I hope she’s feeling better! I wish I could see her. Over.”

“No problem Max! Any other amazingly helpful information you need today? Over.”

Max rolled her eyes at his overly confident tone. “Well, not exactly. I actually just wanted to talk to someone and this was the fastest way. Over.”

“Let me guess. You’re sick of dealing with Billy. Listen, Lucas and I are more than happy to come over there and trap him in a closet if you want. Over.”

Max laughed at the image of Dustin and Lucas dragging a tied up Billy down the hall. She laughed so hard that she forgot that she was on a walkie-talkie and not talking to Dustin in person.

“Max, you still there? We can do it if you want. Over,” Dustin said.

“No, no it’s ok,” laughed Max. “I’m not really annoyed with him. He’s better believe it or not. Over.”

“I’ll believe not. Over.”

Max rolled her eyes. “Yeah well the reason I want to talk does have to do with him. And Steve really. It’s weird but...I think they’re friends now. Over—”

“Wait a second! Are you shitting me? No way are they friends.”

Max waited for a few tense seconds of silence before she sarcastically said, “What about the whole over thing?”



“Forget that! Steve’s only dealing with him because he’s a swell guy,” piped up Dustin. “That and I’m guessing he got dropped on his head as a baby. No way would someone sane take in Billy just like that.”

“Dustin I’m being serious.”

“Ok, I’m sorry! But like, I’ll admit Billy’s been less of an ass lately. Right? I mean we’ve all kind of agreed to that and he’s not the utter monster we thought. But what’s different now?”

“He hasn’t been a dick in like...the past thirty-two hours,” Max estimated. “I guess technically he’s still a dick but he’s not really mean anymore. It’s more like teasing what he does. And Steve and Billy have been joking together and like, actually talking! Not just a quick word about dinner or when the other is using the shower. They’ve been having conversations! Steve even hugged him.”

“Steve hugged who? Over.”

“Will!” Dustin exclaimed. “Where are you?”

“Stopped on the side of the road. I was riding over to see if you wanted to come with me to Hopper’s when I heard the radio go off. O —”

“Not doing that,” Max quickly said.

“And we’re talking about Billy.”

“Did something happen?” asked Will.

“No,” Dustin said. “That’s the problem. Apparently Steve and Billy are friends!”

“So Billy’s just been nice. For no reason? I mean Steve I can see. That’s just who he is,” said Will. “But Billy? Are you sure?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really get it either,” Max said. “That’s why I wanted to talk to someone, to see if it was as weird as I thought. It’s not bad though. Just...”

“Weird,” Will said. “I have to agree.”

“So are we just going to have to except this now or what?” asked Dustin. “Billy’s seriously part of the group?”

“I don’t mind,” Will quickly said before Max could jump in. “He was kind to Jane and Nancy likes him.”

Max could practically see Dustin shaking his head as he said, “But are we just going to ignore that—”

“Wait!” Max cried. “I hear someone coming, shut up!”

Thankfully they did and as Steve walked in, Max got the idea to press the talk button. She guessed that this would be interesting for everyone else.

“Hey Max, weird question but when is Billy’s birthday?”

“In like four days. Why?”

“I was thinking we could do something for him. As a surprise that is. I just feel like he could use something good like that,” Steve said. He looked uncertain but hopeful and Max wondered what going along with this could mean. As far as she could tell, Billy isolating himself had only made it harder for people to reach out for him. But with this action, maybe it could help further signify how much he’d begun to change and how much he was a part of their group.

“I like it,” Max said with a small smile. “I think he prefers vanilla, cake or ice cream.”

“Thanks Max,” Steve said. He started to leave but quickly turned around. “Do you think I should tell Nancy too or would that be too much?”

Max hesitated for a second, trying to imagine all the good and bad reactions Billy could have to the surprise. “I think...maybe Nancy’s a bit much for this time around. But we get a birthday every year so...”

“Good thinking Max. Thanks again,” Steve said.

Seconds after he closed the door, Will and Dustin immediately fought for control over who got to talk. Eventually Will won and he cried

out, "That's really nice!"

"It's weird!" Dustin said. "A birthday party for Billy!? Did Steve hit his head again!?"

"When did he hit it the first time?" asked Will.

"Never mind that," snorted Max. "Just don't tell anyone. Please?"

"You mean you're actually going along with all this?" asked Dustin.

"Yes! And please don't go and tell everyone. Pinky promise!"

"That only really works in person."

"Doesn't matter," Will quickly said. "I promise Max. You just have to tell us how it goes!"

"I swear," Max replied, grinning from ear to ear. "Now you two keep your mouths shut. Got it?"

"Fine," sighed Dustin. "So Will, you still riding down to me?"

"Doing it now."

"Ok, when I get back in range I'll tell you how Jane's doing. Ok?" asked Dustin.

"Sounds great. Thanks guys," Max said.

"You're welcome," replied Will.

"No problem. Talk to you later Max. Over and out."

---

Max couldn't believe she'd planned something for Billy's birthday. She was surprised she remembered it at all. But here she was with Steve in the kitchen, doing the finishing touches with the cake. And by finishing touches, they of course meant putting candles on it. Since it wasn't like they could get Billy out of the house, Steve had just bought one. Max had made sure to tell Steve when Billy went into the shower and then he dashed out to grab it so it would actually

be a surprise.

As far as normal birthdays went, Max imagined this wasn't what most kids wanted for their eighteenth birthday. But then, she had no idea what kind of significance Billy's birthday held for him. She hoped there weren't any bad connotations to it. Either way, she felt surer that Billy wouldn't flip like he might have before. Hopefully whatever the past birthdays had been, this could bring about better memories.

They had it finished by the time Billy came downstairs looking for dinner. He had his jeans on and nothing else, a towel thrown around his shoulders and his hair and skin still slightly damp. He froze upon walking into the kitchen though, eyes falling on the cake in confusion.

"Happy-Happy birthday Billy," Max got out, squeezing her hands together. This had been a good idea? Hadn't it?

For a moment, it looked like Billy wasn't going to respond and Max worried that Billy was going to get angry despite her doubts. However, his face switched to a large grin. He ran his tongue over his lips and let out a boisterous laugh. "My birthday was yesterday you twerp!"

"Well I did better than you! You didn't even know my month," smirked Max.

"Hey, you're not wrong there," Billy said as he raised his hands in mock surrender. He looked at the cake again. His lips pursed. "Did you...Harrington did you make it?"

"Do you think I could make a cake look this good in twenty minutes and clean up everything too?" snorted Steve. "Naw, just bought it. It was the only way to keep it a surprise. Even if it's a belated birthday."

Billy shook his head, the smile slowly coming back. "You...you never cease to fucking surprise do you Steve? I can't believe you...you both just did this?"

"It's not like some magic birthday fairy told us to," snorted Steve.

“And if it had, it probably would have gotten the day right.”

“Eh, no harm no fowl,” Billy said with a shrug.

He looked over the scene again and Max couldn't help the smile it brought out. Maybe having Nancy there would have pleased Billy too but she was happy about what she'd told Steve. This felt good, like a really new beginning. And then just Billy's utter shock over it all. It made it pretty clear that he'd never had anyone do something like this for him. It made Max sad, even her mom and dad had tried to do something for her birthday even when they were divorcing. But it didn't matter what had happened in the past. She and Steve were here and they'd make each birthday from here on out worth it.

Steve threw Billy a pack of cigarettes with a poorly tied bow.

“Ah, you shouldn't have Harrington,” snorted Billy. “You already buy all my cigarettes anyways.”

“And technically I bought those too but it was with Max's pocket change.”

“Probably a crap present huh?” Max sighed. It was a false sigh but from Billy's expression, it was obvious he didn't expect anything else. “I couldn't think of anything though and asking you would have just given it away.”

“Hey, you did fucking fine Max. It's not like you know a shitload about me to make a good guess. And neither of us really have the room to just get random shit,” Billy said as he pulled one out. He pointed the unlit end at her. “Just know you shouldn't fucking start. It's a bad habit.”

Max rolled her eyes. “My mom already gave me the whole speech.”

“Well good on Susan,” smirked Billy. He walked closer as he lit the cigarette and looked at the cake. “And you even got the good shit? You shouldn't have.”

“Special occasion,” Steve smiled.

“Want to play Clue?” Max quickly asked. “Mike left it for me one

time.”

“Sure, why the hell not? We all sit in front of the damn TV enough as it is anyways,” replied Billy. He took a drag and asked, “So, we cutting this thing or just using our hands?”

Max smirked and wiggled her fingers. It was a pretty great idea, just them sitting around the cake and utterly destroying it with full fists.

“Don’t even think about it,” Steve said, interrupting her thought before she could put it into action. “Getting this out of the carpet would be hell. We’re using plates.”

Both Max and Billy rolled their eyes but they went along with Steve all the same. Once everyone had slices and were situated in the living room, Max put into action the next part of the plan that she and Steve had made. Perhaps it was a little childish but she wanted Billy to really be surprised with this one. Now that he already knew about this and assumed he’d gotten the only thing Max could think to give him, he would really be comfortable and not expecting anything. That’s what would make this all the more fun.

So as they set out Clue, Max and Steve purposely planned to lose. Neither of them made proper notes of what cards they saw, even though Max got lucky and was pretty sure she knew who, what and where by the twelfth round.

It didn’t take long after that for Billy to make a guess. “Alright, Mustard, Pipe, Hall. Tell me I’m wrong Harrington.”

Steve pulled out the cards and slammed each one against the board. “Right on the money.”

“Fuck yeah!” grinned Billy. Max also smiled. He didn’t have a clue.

Steve stood up as if to stretch and said, “Well, I guess the winner should get some kind of compensation. All winners should get a prize, right Max?”

“Totally.”

“What—” Billy stopped, catching the package that Steve threw at

him. It was about as poorly wrapped as the bow on the cigarette pack but to be fair, Steve and Max had never had a reason to wrap a present themselves.

They watched in anticipation as Billy stared at it with a small frown. "I thought you said..."

"Just a prize for any winner," Steve shrugged.

Max nodded as Billy looked at them with clear doubt in his eyes. He quickly tore off the wrapping to reveal a plain box which he just as quickly forced open. He pulled out the silver chain, holding it up to his eyes. It took him a moment but when he understood, his eyes went wider than when he'd seen the cake.

"This...it's my birth sign," he muttered. The chain was simple and plain except for two small pieces with engraved zodiac symbols. It wasn't too flashy and went with everything else Billy tended to wear. He looked to the other zodiac symbol. "Whose..."

"It's mine," Max said. She looked down shyly. "Names seemed too cheesy and you were right. I don't know a lot about you too make too good of a guess. But I...it was Steve's idea too! But I just...I thought it might be cool if—"

Max didn't get out her next line, instead her throat forcing out a surprised yelp as she felt Billy grab her and pull her over. She tried to grumble out something but Billy spoke over her as his arm went around her shoulders.

"You are too damn smart. You know that? And you too Steve. Well done." Billy gave her a half hug with his arm before he pulled the bracelet on. "It's fucking great little sis. I mean it."

Technically he'd called her sister before but...this was so casual. Not Max or Maxine or twerp or dork or idiot. This wasn't a declaration saying he was accepting her as his sister. It was just how siblings talked and Max replied, "I knew you didn't have much left so...I figured I might add to your jewelry collection again. Bro."

Billy laughed at that, twisting his arm so the chain could be seen on

all sides. “This is practically grade A shit. Don’t tell me you stole it.”

Max rolled her eyes. “It’s custom. Remember? You can’t steal something custom.”

“Used my parents’ money,” Steve admitted.

“I’ll make sure to thank Mr. and Mrs. Harrington upon their return then,” snorted Billy.

“Now that would be a fucking weird conversation.”

They all laughed, Max eventually convincing them both to play another game of Clue with her.

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“Obviously I want you back here once a week for checkups but I’d say in just two more days you can go home,” said Dr. Owens.

Nancy breathed a sigh of relief. Next to learning that Billy was still alive, this was by far the best news Nancy had gotten in a while.

“What about the quarantine?” asked Nancy.

“After assuring that what we gave you wouldn’t have any negative effect to you or the surrounding ecosystem, we were able to go through the right channels and have it dispersed throughout the necessary regions. Any fungi that have successfully spread, any infected hosts, will be gone by the end of the week. The quarantine is finally being lifted today. After nearly nine weeks of it being in affect as well.”

“It really is July 17<sup>th</sup>?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“My whole summer’s been used up,” snorted Nancy. “I feel like I should be more upset about that but the whole thing is the last of my worries.”

Dr. Owens showed her a kind smile. “It certainly should be the first thing on your mind, teenage girl like you. I’m sorry you didn’t get to



enjoy it.”

A few months ago, Nancy wouldn't have believed a single word Dr. Owens had just said. After being forced to spend so much time with him though, she'd come to see what Will saw in him and how Hopper and Joyce could trust him at all. He wasn't all bad and at least in this instance, he had their best interests in mind.

“Thank you,” Nancy said.

“You're welcome. I'll see you tomorrow as—”

“Doctor?”

“Yes?”

“I'm not sorry about blowing the top off this place,” Nancy said, her mouth stretched into a hard line. “It gave Barb the justice that you people weren't willing to do. But...I am sorry for what trouble it might have caused you.”

Dr. Owens eased back into his seat. “What's the word that kids are using so often today? A douche? I was very much that to you and good Mr. Byers. I'll be the first to admit that and my priorities were focused on my work. But I suppose seeing everything firsthand and not just reading reports from and about Brenner made me realize the importance of what happens here to the people of this town, like young Will and your friend. If I'm being perfectly honest, I'm glad you and that erratic investigator Murray were successful. This place needed to be stopped and I'm sorry we had to come back at all.”

“Well...if it had to be anyone, I'm thankful it's you. Better to have someone who knows what they're doing, right?” asked Nancy.

“A good point. And a good compromise,” smiled Dr. Owens. He clapped her on the knee and stood up. “One more day of testing tomorrow and then you'll be released the day after.”

Again, it was hard not to smile at that. “Sounds perfect doctor. Good night.”

“Good night Nancy.”

With that, Dr. Owens was gone and Nancy was left alone. She'd long since been moved to a smaller, more private room since there was no reason to house Billy too and she also didn't have to worry about all the equipment that had been hooked up to her before.

Sometime had passed since she'd woken up and everyone had still come to visit her as often as possible. She'd gotten more updates from Mike about what their mom and dad thought and though they'd had their disagreements in the past, Nancy honestly couldn't wait to see them again. She was a bit excited to see Holly too. She was getting big enough to fully understand what a brother and sister meant and had apparently been missing Nancy a lot. The idea of picking her up and hugging her definitely put a smile on Nancy's face too.

Besides Mike, Steve had been there just as often. Billy and Max didn't come except for what seemed like once in a blue moon simply because it was too dangerous for them to go out during the day. However, Nancy got plenty of updates from Steve. He'd even told her about the little party they'd thrown and she'd pouted over it.

"And I wasn't invited?" Nancy had teased. "How rude."

Steve had laughed in response. "Next time Nancy. We promise."

They had talked a little about Hopper's increasing plans on making sure Neil got put in jail and making sure Max and Billy never had to see him again. Steve had assured her that despite turning eighteen, Billy wasn't going to skip town. He'd promised Max that he'd stick around to testify. Steve didn't really have to assure Nancy on that part though. Somehow she just knew he would.

The other kids came less often but Dustin always had a whole book of information to give her which had never failed to brighten up Nancy's day.

Hopper had come too, making sure she was ok, checking on what the Lab was doing, and also making sure her cover story was solid. Nancy had thought it kind of cute that the Chief felt he needed to worry about something like that. By this point she was a pro.

But besides all that, Jonathan had been by her side constantly, at

least up until now. Despite only just getting Dr. Owens' confirmation a few minutes ago, she'd suspected she'd be released soon and even if not, she'd insisted Jonathan go home. The last time she'd seen Joyce, she could tell she needed it. Joyce hadn't asked her son of course, knowing why it was so important that he stay by Nancy's side but by now, Nancy was fine and she didn't need anyone looking over her.

Joyce on the other hand clearly missed her elder son and Will had clearly been in the same boat, even if he hadn't said anything like his mother. Because of that, Nancy had pushed him to sleep in his own bed, at least for tonight and to have breakfast with his family.

She didn't regret her decision, even as she lied in the empty room. The only light now came from a heart monitor and the moon coming in through the blinds. Maybe right after waking up it would have scared her but after growing used to the room and seeing so many people in and out of it, she didn't have to worry about being alone.

Nancy fell asleep without a worry in her head. However, she'd soon wish she hadn't pushed Jonathan to go home.

---

Jane looked around.

It was the dark place but she hadn't come here. Not on purpose. She'd just fallen asleep against Hopper while they'd watched a movie. Despite Mike's promises, she hadn't been feeling much better in past days. On the plus side, that meant she got to eat a lot of ice cream and mostly stay wrapped in a blanket all day.

Hopper had also been around a lot more. Having him and her friends almost constantly there was nice but it was less nice knowing they stayed more out of worry than anything else.

That day her friends had long since left and she understood Hopper had managed to get more time off work to stay with her longer. She'd taken advantage of that, curling up next to him and watching everything that he'd rented from the video store. It had been nice, even if she'd felt crappy.

Sleep had lately been the only way she could escape the shivers and

sniffling nose yet here she was now.

Jane walked around. The place felt too real. This wasn't her recreation of the dark place. It was it. But she hadn't been the one to search for it. She hadn't reached for it or been trying to find someone. In fact, the more she reached forward and felt the space around her, the less she felt in control. Something else had pulled her here.

She walked forward, not out of bravery but desperation. She wouldn't be the one getting snuck up on. If something else was out there, then she needed to act first. She thought about Hopper, about her last memory of him. She wanted to get back to that memory as quickly as possible and that was what pushed her forward.

Seconds ticked by as Jane searched for any sign. The water splashed out from around her as the darkness only grew. Still nothing...

She didn't hear or feel anything. Something like instinct had her pause though, silently telling her to turn around. She slowly did, relief washing over her at what she saw.

It was Nancy and Billy! Had they been called too?

Jane started to run to them but froze as she realized she recognized more than just their backsides. They were in the exact same clothes they'd been in when she'd visited them in the dark place. Were they memories? Echoes? Why only them? Were there others out there in the dark?

She was afraid to approach them, afraid that they'd vanish or do something more or turn out to be actually there. She didn't want any of those outcomes so she remained frozen in place.

Instead, they made the first move. Nancy seemed to take notice first, looking back, and then Billy. They stared for a moment and then moved closer. Jane remained frozen.

"You again," said Nancy. "Perhaps you are hindering."

"No. Too small," replied Billy.

“Don’t let it deceive. You don’t carry the same information on it as I do.”

“Why does it matter? We will still come through.”

“The gate is organic this time. We’ve never had an organic gate,” Nancy shot back. She looked angry. The emotion looked wrong on her face. “We remain wary.”

“Fine. But it doesn’t change anything. We will go through, the gate will be destroyed, and we shall spread as always.”

“We’ve reached fewer than before.”

“But not the fewest,” Billy reminded her. “This will be just as simple.”

“I worry.”

“You are the part that’s meant to.”

“This dimension isn’t as blind to everything.”

“We’ve passed through dimensions far more advanced.”

“You are right,” sighed Nancy.

“That is what I’m meant to do.”

“I wished to spread further. We’ve learned little.”

“We’ll grow once there,” Billy replied. “We never fully grow until after passing through the gate.”

“True.”

“We’re hungry.”

“We know. Just a little more and then we can pull ourselves forward.”

“We’re bored of the past one.”

“We are,” agreed Nancy.

Jane cautiously stepped forward. “I don’t understand.”

“So it’s fully aware,” Billy said.

“We should catalog it.”

“We are,” Billy murmured.

“In case we come across another organic gate.”

“In case.”

Jane looked at them. They were talking funny. They looked like Billy and Nancy but didn’t sound like them. “Who are you?” She whispered it, afraid and unable to predict how they would answer.

“You don’t need to know,” said Nancy.

“It doesn’t matter if it does.”

“But just in case.”

“Alright. In case,” Billy said, firmly closing his mouth.

The actions made Jane squirmed and she quickly looked elsewhere. She looked at the unending dark around and above them. And then she finally glanced down.

“No!” The scream ripped from Jane’s throat as she fell to her knees.

Billy and Nancy looked down as well.

“Interesting,” said Nancy.

“They usually die before we come and replace them.”

“This has never happened.”

“These didn’t die. And the gate is organic. Perhaps it pulled them here with us.”

“Perhaps they know a switch will come.”

“Perhaps.”

Billy and Nancy spoke as Jane continued to scream, no longer focusing on them. After all, they weren't Billy and Nancy. Billy and Nancy were below.

It was like looking at glass. Nancy stood on the other side, jumping up and down while Billy banged his fists right where Jane's hands were pressed down. She couldn't feel them though. No sound passed over despite how their veins bulged and they roared to be heard.

Billy closed his eyes, his head falling against the glass. Jane tried to press her hand against him but it didn't matter how much pressure she put down. Nothing gave.

Jane's throat felt raw. What was she supposed to do? This wasn't like being in the cabin. She couldn't reach out and break the glass with her mind, she couldn't reach them!

“It knows something,” the other Nancy suddenly said.

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose not.”

“Help them!” screamed Jane. She stood up and held out her hands but nothing happened.

“It amuses us,” said other Billy.

“It doesn't intend it,” said other Nancy.

“It thinks it holds power here.”

“It is visiting.”

“It is partially visiting.”

“This is our home.”

“Our rules.”

“And now they disappear.”

Jane’s head whipped back just in time to see Billy and Nancy being pulled further down, to them up. They vanished in a flash and Jane screamed louder as she collapsed and tried to reach them. Something had to happen. Anything! But other than the water moving away from her fists hitting the ground again and again, nothing happened.

“No!!!”

Suddenly she felt their hands on her and just as she looked up, she watched other Nancy say, “Open.”

Jane screamed.

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The kiss had been more of a way to try and prove to Billy he wasn’t alone. Sure, Steve wasn’t going to lie and say the guy was unattractive but there hadn’t been any hidden intent in it either. Yet somehow Steve found himself in Billy’s bed again and not for the second time.

It had happened by accident and on purpose. Sometimes they simply fell asleep next to each other after a movie or after talking all night. Other times Steve simply followed Billy to his room, assuming he needed someone and didn’t want to be alone. There wasn’t any hidden intent in it. He’d do the same for Nancy if she needed it without even a single thought of trying to push it further.

Yet now...

He started wondering if Billy found him attractive at all. He wondered what would happen if he asked Billy if he could kiss him again. It was weird and Steve felt like he was in seventh grade again, asking for a first kiss once more. He supposed it made since. He was dealing with a part of himself he’d long kept hidden but it didn’t make it any less embarrassing or terrifying.

The first night he found himself curled against Billy had made Steve think that this thing they were doing was going to come to a full stop though. He’d known he cuddled in his sleep but that was usually with



his own damn pillow. It was less often that he grabbed someone else.

And sure, he knew Billy liked guys and he was great at playing the play boy angle but that didn't mean he wanted that kind of contact.

Yet following what seemed to be Billy's MO, they didn't actually talk about it. Billy didn't mention it once. In terms of Billy's own thoughts, that tended to mean he didn't mind it which just confused Steve more.

And on top of that, he was pretty sure Max had figured out the arrangement or was damn near close to it. Steve wasn't sure how to feel about that, if he should talk to her at all to either set the record straight or see if she could better explain what Billy might be thinking. He didn't even know what they were doing or if a word could be put to it. Steve suspected he'd have to ask soon and it would have to be him. Billy sure as hell wouldn't be direct about it. But for now, Steve just stuck to the fact that Billy clearly wanted and needed the presence of a warm body so Steve stayed that.

For the next few days after Billy's birthday, things were good. They even got word the quarantine was ending and Nancy would be going home soon. It seemed like the supernatural side of things was done. It meant they'd have to soon focus on the problem that was Neil but once that was done...well maybe Steve could properly talk to Billy about whatever this was.

That was the idea at least up until the moment Billy woke up screaming.

In all the nights Steve had slept by him, he'd been fairly sure Billy hadn't had a bad dream, at least nothing so bad that it woke up Steve. This time it did and thankfully Steve had wrapped around Billy in the night. The split second that Steve woke after Billy, he managed to grab him. Steve could tell Billy was trying to jump up, likely in a blind panic, but Steve forced him back down, wrapping his arms fully around his chest.

"Billy calm down! You're alright! It was just a bad dream. You're—"

"No," Billy choked out. He used the momentary confusion that it

brought Steve to suddenly break out of his grip.

Max was at the door, having been drawn by his scream. Billy practically ran her over though, running out the door.

“Billy!” Steve yelled out, untangling himself from the sheets before he could properly get up.

Billy didn’t run for the stairs though. Instead he ran for Steve’s parents’ room. Max and Steve quickly followed as Billy scrambled over the bed and dragged the phone to him. He looked up with a wild look in his eyes.

“What’s Hopper’s number?”

Steve frowned. “Why—”

“What’s his number?!”

They all jumped, the phone going off before Steve could say a single one. Billy picked up. “Nancy? Jane?”

Steve’s hair stood on end. There was only one reason why those two would immediately spring to Billy’s mind but it didn’t explain what had happened.

Max jumped on the bed, sticking her head by the receiver. Billy was too wrapped up in what the caller was saying to push her away and Steve quickly rushed around the bed to do the same. He managed to catch “—and Nancy too?”

“Yeah Chief,” Billy replied, his voice shaking.

“We’re heading to the Lab now. Get Steve to take you.” Hopper’s voice was unmistakable but the way he spoke had Steve’s skin crawling. The Chief sounded fucking terrified. Like end of the world terrified. “We’ll meet you there.”

“Ok,” Billy said. He hung up the phone and the moment he did, the adrenaline in him seemed to disappear. His head fell in to his hands as his shoulders shook. The moan he let out was soft and low. “No, god no.”

“Billy, what’s happened?” asked Steve. He tried to keep himself from shaking Billy in a panic. “Please, we need to know.”

“Jane is...she’s hurt really bad,” whispered Billy. “The fungi...they were like the damn foot soldiers or something. The pods the encoders. It’s not fucking over. It isn’t.”

The color drained from Max’s face. “Fuck.”

“Fuck is damn right,” whispered Billy.

“And the Chief wants us to get to the Lab?” asked Steve.

Billy nodded, his form still shaking. “We were in the dark place again. Nancy and me. Chief doesn’t know for sure but he’s guessing she experienced it too.”

“Shit.” Steve rubbed his eyes tiredly, forcing himself to calm down as he imagined all the outcomes that could occur from this. “I...I’m going to call Jonathan. If Nancy’s in danger again, he deserves to know. You two get dressed. We’re leaving in five.”

Billy and Max nodded as Steve headed to his own room. He dressed quickly, not caring what he put on as he rushed downstairs to use that phone and give Max and Billy some privacy.

He dialed the Byers’ house number from memory and it wasn’t long before Joyce picked up.

“The pods aren’t over,” Steve immediately said. “Nancy and Billy and Jane are in danger and we’re meeting at the Lab now.”

“Oh god, we’ll be there as soon as we can,” Joyce promised.

“We’ll see you there,” Steve said, hanging up just as Billy and Max came down the stairs.

They piled into the car as quickly as they could and Steve pulled out and into the night not even glancing at the speedometer once.

---

After Jane had fallen asleep, Jim had picked her up and put her to

bed before going to his own. He'd been on edge for the past few days, knowing Jane was sick and that nothing was apparently helping her. However, he'd been like the kids, thinking it was a cold or something simple and it was only different with Jane because she was different.

But then he'd woken to the sound of glass breaking and the tortured scream and his entire world seemed to shatter with it.

Hopper was up in seconds, pushing the broken objects aside with his feet as he managed to get to Jane.

"El, El what's wrong! Jane!"

She was burning up, sweat dripping from her forehead and her breath erratic. He held her close, scooping her into his arms.

"Don't do this sweetheart. Please, please just open her eyes. Yeah... there you go sweetheart. There you are," whispered Hopper. He pushed her curls away and quickly kissed her forehead. He didn't even bother asking if it was a bad dream. "What happened?"

Jane slowly opened her mouth, repeating back broken phrases and little things she'd seen. Each word she said had Hopper's hair rising.

"We need to go to—"

"Nancy," whispered Jane. "Billy. They could be hurt. Please...I need to know they are safe."

"Alright...ok but then we're going to the Lab," Hopper murmured, carefully taking her out of the room and setting her on the couch. He called up Steve's house first and when Billy answered, Hopper could at least breathe easy knowing the kid was awake. He told him to go to the Lab and then he called Dr. Owens' personal number.

It rang and rang and Hopper was about to throw his phone down, pick up Jane, and just run out of their when Dr. Owens finally answered. "Pops I know. Nancy's awake and she's told me what she can."

"Well you don't know it all. Jane's fever has spiked. I think her being sick is connected to all this."

“God, bring her in as quickly as you can. I’ll have a room set up for her,” Dr. Owens replied.

With that settled, Jim went and pulled his pants and shoes on before going to pick up Jane again. She looked so frail and like every inch of her was on fire. All he could think of was Sara and her final moments. He couldn’t lose another daughter. Not again.

He took her to the truck, making sure she was comfortable before hurrying around to the other side. He sped as quickly as he could, getting to the Lab in record time. He screeched to a stop in front of the doors and picked up Jane again, hurrying to the entrance. Dr. Owens was waiting and quickly opened it for him.

“I figured you’d be with Nancy.”

“I was but I needed to let you in. I’m the only one here at this hour.”

Jim felt both better and more on edge with that fact.

As they walked to the elevator, Dr. Owens checked Jane’s eyes and pulse. “Jane, you can hear us right? You’re conscious?”

She gave a weak nod.

“Good. Try to stay awake if you can.” He took out an instrument and read her temperature. Jim got a good look at the number and his eyes went wide.

“She should be dead.” The sound came out tortured and broken. It was too high for any person. It was like holding a small oven in his arms.

“But she isn’t,” pressed Dr. Owens. “That means there’s still hope.”

The elevators dinged open and they quickly walked out. Jim followed Dr. Owens and they came to a room. Nancy was there moving equipment around. Damn, Dr. Owens hadn’t been lying about being the only one there.

“Is this right?” asked Nancy as she plugged something in.

“Perfect. Thank you Nancy,” murmured Dr. Owens. “Jim, place her there.”

Nancy whipped around, realizing they were both in there. Jane weakly reached for her and Nancy quickly took her hand.

“I couldn’t reach you...”

“You did all you could El,” whispered Nancy. “It’s ok. I’m here now. It’s ok.”

“It hurts.”

Jim took her other hand. “We’re going to make it better. I promise.”

“You promised I’d get better.”

“And you will,” pressed Jim. “We never break promises. Isn’t that right?”

Jane gave a weak nod and Jim squeezed her hand. Dr. Owens had been checking on the equipment again when he came over with a tangle of wires in his hands. Jane flinched away but that was all her energy could muster.

Dr. Owens paused though and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I promise not to do anything without yours or Jim’s say-so. I’m just going to be running a few tests to figure out how to help you. Is that alright?”

Jane nodded but the movement was even weaker than the one she’d given a few seconds ago.

Dr. Owens moved forward and gently pressed things against her head and put a clamp on her finger to monitor her heart.

“I’m going to draw your blood. Alright? It will just hurt for a moment.”

“Ok,” whispered Jane.

Jim didn’t let go of her hand all while Dr. Owens slowly and

thoroughly moved around Jane. Seeing as Jim couldn't do anything else but be there, he filled them in on what Jane had told him. Now they knew what had happened but it still felt like they didn't know any more than they had before.

Eventually Nancy stood up and said, "The others should be here by now. I'll go let them in."

"Thank you Nancy," Dr. Owens replied without looking up.

---

Nancy's skin was crawling. It hadn't stopped since she'd woken up. She tried waiting for the elevator but it was too slow so she ran down the stairs instead, jumping the last three and rushing out the door. Jim had mentioned that he'd spoken with Billy but Nancy couldn't believe it until she saw him.

It had been like drowning but she hadn't felt any water. She'd desperately reached down, trying to get back to the image of herself and the mirrored Billy and Jane but she couldn't. She'd looked for Billy but he'd disappeared in the dark. Nothingness...all alone. No one.

She ran into the lobby. Steve, Max, Billy, Jonathan, and Will were standing by the door desperately looking in. She ran all the way there, throwing open the door and running straight into Billy.

"Oh thank god!" she gasped out. "You're alive!"

"Me!? I couldn't find you!" cried Billy. He was shaking as badly as she was. "I tried but it was like—"

"Drowning," Nancy finished.

"I saw Eleven! Is she—"

"It was really her. She was there but she's not ok. She's burning up," Nancy responded. They started to part but Nancy didn't let go of his hands yet. She still needed that assurance that he was really there.

"Mom's coming with everyone else," Will suddenly piped up. "We figured you'd want to see Mike too."

“Yeah, yeah I do,” murmured Nancy. “We’ll wait for them here.”

“Nancy,” Jonathan murmured. He placed a hand on her shoulder and she slowly untangled her fingers from Billy. She took hold of Jonathan and kissed him and then held him tight. “I should have been here. I should have—”

“And done what?” asked Nancy. “You couldn’t have helped and it was me who told you to go sleep in your own bed tonight,” murmured Nancy. “It’s not your fault.”

She turned to Steve, hugging him just as tightly and thankful that he’d come too but she had to go back to grabbing hold of Billy’s hand. He had that same desperate look in his eyes that Nancy knew she was mirroring. It was like they’d never wake up again.

“Billy said they’re back. The pod people,” Steve said. “That there were actual copies.”

Nancy nodded and told them everything Hopper had told her.

“Dustin’s naming fits better than we thought,” murmured Will.

“Shit, what are we going to do?” asked Max.

“I don’t know,” murmured Nancy. “I don’t think they can actually get us from the dark place. I feel that what’s happening there is new to them as well.”

“So these are...are aliens that go from dimension to dimension, make copies of everything and then come into this new world and replace them?” asked Jonathan.

“And they just spread until they’ve copied everything?” asked Steve.

Nancy nodded. “The dark place seems to be their home and the gates...I don’t think they make them. I think they have to find them and it’s different for every dimension.”

“And this one is Jane,” Max said. “Can we stop them at all?”

“I don’t know,” Nancy groaned. “I don’t! Dr. Owens is working but



I'm afraid this is above him too."

They all looked up upon hearing a car coming down the road. They watched Joyce come screeching to a stop next to all their other cars. She jumped out with the rest of the kids.

Joyce immediately enveloped Nancy and Billy into a tight hug. She didn't say anything, likely knowing that there wasn't much she could say to change the situation. When she pulled back, Mike rushed forward and Nancy held him as tightly as she'd held him upon waking up.

"Where's El?" he whispered.

"Upstairs. I'll show you guys the way. I'm sure she'll appreciate you're all here for her," murmured Nancy.

The other kids nodded and Nancy quickly went to the elevator, pressing the button and anxiously tapping her foot as it came down.

Once everyone was up there, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Max all went to see Jane and then Billy, Jonathan, Steve, and Joyce took turns, the room not big enough for all of them at once. When Dr. Owens asked for a moment of privacy, Hopper reluctantly left but it gave them all time to sit down and to fill everyone in on what had happened, along with theorizing what their next move should be.

Though Nancy was thankful that everyone was here and not scattered about like what had happened the last two times, she still stuck closest to Billy. He didn't seem to mind, understanding that they were the only two that could fully understand the emotional aspect of what had just happened.

And if they got pulled back, if it turned out the final fight was to be in the dark place, Nancy would only have Billy, if even that. She shivered at the thought.

What would happen next?

## 9. Please...

### Notes for the Chapter:

A massive thank you! Only two more chapters left! God, I don't want this to be over but I've enjoyed writing this so much and I think you'll enjoy the ending as much as I am writing it. Thank you again and I hope you enjoy!

Billy couldn't sleep. Granted, no one could.

Once they'd gotten permission, the kids had run back into the room along with Hopper. Joyce had left a little while ago to get everyone something to eat and it left Billy with Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan. They were sitting in the hallway outside Jane's room in silence, lights dim and faces dower.

Why did this all have to rest on the kid? It wasn't fucking fair, just like Neil taking his anger out on Max. Jane may have superpowers but she was a fucking kid. If the world was fucking fair, then Billy would be at the brunt end of all this. Hell knew he deserved it. But the world was far from fair and all he could do was sit and remain fearful of being pulled back to the dark place. The thought that maybe sleep caused it was what forced Billy to remain awake despite how fucking exhausted he was. Nancy looked about just as bad and Steve and Jonathan weren't far behind.

Billy had finally assured himself that Nancy was there and breathing. He knew he was back in the real world and he had multiple anchors. Because of that, they'd slowly drifted through the passing hours. Nancy was now lying down with her head in Jonathan's lap as he gently brushed his fingers through her hair. Billy sat on the other side of the hallway, Steve by his side and staring off into nothingness, lost in thought.

Hours had passed and it was well into midday. Hopper hadn't even bothered to leave despite the fact that three different sets of parents had to be desperately looking for their kids by now. Billy wondered if the police would figure out where he was and come looking for him.

Or maybe the town would be thrown into panic because now their sheriff was missing along with a total of five kids, three teens, and Joyce Byers as well.

In a different setting, it would almost be amusing. But now Billy was tied to these people and this god damn town and all he could feel was anxiety and desperation. There wasn't anything that could be done to help Hopper or the town in general so Billy just remained silent.

The hall remained devoid of noise until Jonathan broke the quiet. Nancy sat up as he murmured, "I'm going to go let my mom back in. She should be here by now."

They silently nodded in agreement and watched him leave. They remained there until Jonathan and Joyce got back, bags in their hands full of food. It was passed around, no one really hungry but knowing full well that they'd likely need their strength in the coming hours. Joyce went in to feed the kids too, likely talking to Hopper and Dr. Owens to see if anything new had happened but of course Billy knew it hadn't.

Hundreds of minutes passing by and they still knew nothing more.

After eating, Billy slumped against Steve's side, his head falling on his shoulder. For once, he didn't care if anyone looked or what they thought. Just because he was too terrified to sleep didn't mean he wasn't tired as shit and after so many nights of having Steve by his side, he needed that familiarity now.

He no longer thought Steve would push him away and he didn't now, all of them returning to silence again.

The hours continued to pass and twilight came, bringing with it more nothing. Everyone there had been awake for nearly twenty hours and it was really beginning to show, especially in the kids.

Hopper suddenly yelling made Billy jolt fully awake though and all the teens and Joyce quickly rushed into the room. Billy wondered if they'd finally made a breakthrough. At this point, it almost didn't matter if it was good or bad. However, that hope deflated as the Chief continued shouting.

“You can’t have found nothing!”

“If these things are from another dimension then detecting their effects may be impossible with our equipment!” Dr. Owens yelled back. “I am trying Jim but all that I’m getting is that she’s dying!”

“She can’t! You can’t let her!”

“I don’t know what to do!”

Max, Lucas, and Dustin were frozen in shock while tears fell from Mike’s and Will’s eyes. Jane whimpered from her bed, too tired to cry out from the ever increasing pain.

“There has to be something,” whispered Hopper. Everyone could see it in his eyes. He couldn’t lose another daughter. Not like this. Any ledge that he’d pulled himself from he’d go tumbling off if Jane died.

“The only thing I can think to do is to cut her connection with the dark place but I don’t know how. I don’t have any of Dr. Brenner’s notes.”

“Then try and find them!” begged Jim.

Dr. Owens rubbed his eyes. “There may still be copies in the basement but if they’re not there then I don’t know how I might get them.”

“Just try. Please Doc.”

Dr. Owens slowly nodded. “I’ll try. But that’s all I can promise. Get me if something happens.”

Hopper nodded and Dr. Owens managed to get through the sea of people to get out of the room. Mike and Hopper were right by Jane’s side, carefully smoothing her hair back and murmuring kind words to her. For everyone else, there was nothing more to do but silently be there.

Billy hated it with all of his being. He wanted something to hit, something to fight off and defeat. But there was nothing.

At least for the next few minutes.

Dr. Owens was still gone, trying to find files that no one believed he'd successfully get. Billy was looking around the room, tired of staring at the pained kids and everyone else's tortured expressions. He glanced at his reflection in one of the medical instruments, noting the bags under his eyes and how utterly haunted he looked. He started to look elsewhere but something urged him to keep staring. Something felt off.

He took a step towards the reflective surface. He couldn't put his finger on it. What was wrong? What was it?

"Reflections are supposed to be the mirror image," Dustin suddenly piped up. "That's not. That's how you look to everyone else."

The kid had come up behind Billy at some point and was staring with wide eyes. His words had gotten everyone else to turn and look too. Billy understood what Dustin was talking about but the weird thing was that Dustin's reflection was correct. Nancy walked up to his side, her reflection reversed too. Everything else looked normal but her and Billy...

And then the surface warped.

And Jane screamed.

"Holy shit!"

The undulating surface turned into fingers and then a hand that tried pushing itself through the surface. At the same time, Jane's scream lit up the room, lights flashing and glass breaking outwards.

Billy instinctively grabbed hold of the thing and threw it across the room, not really caring what it did or how much it cost. However, the moment he threw that, a metal surface close to Nancy started to do the same.

Billy could feel it. It was impossible not to. He wondered what was supposed to happen if things had gone the creatures' way. Maybe they would have appeared where Billy had last been alive. Maybe they came through where they liked with no attachments. But Billy

was alive and he could feel his counterpart trying to find him, trying to get to him. When the third reflective surface started to contort, it clicked in Billy's head that there was only one thing to do.

"Nancy, we need to leave," growled Billy as he grabbed her hand.

Mike jumped forward. "What—"

"They're coming," Nancy replied, looking over at Billy with wide eyes. She could feel it too. Billy saw it. "They're coming for us. Not Jane. If we stay here you're all going to be in danger."

"I'm going with you," Jonathan said.

Steve stepped closer. "Me too."

"Then we need to hurry," Billy replied, grip tightening on Nancy. "They'll follow us."

"What about Jane?!" asked Hopper. "What else can you feel?!"

"I don't know! But my guess is if you cut off her connection to the dark place, it'll stop these things from coming to us and save her," Billy replied. He watched as another reflective surface warped. "We need to go. Now!"

"Billy!" Max yelled out, grabbing hold of him. "Don't do anything stupid!"

"I'll try not to sis." He rubbed her hair, a small part of him wondering if it would be the last time he saw Max. He didn't have time to think about that or what it meant to him though as he pulled Nancy out of the room, Jonathan and Steve running with them.

"It's our reflections! That's how they're reaching us," Nancy said as they ran down the halls.

"Then we drive into the middle of the woods and stay there," Jonathan tried.

Billy shook his head as the four of them ran to the stairwell instead. "They'll find a way to us."

“And we don’t know what would happen if we’re not near something reflective. What if they default to somewhere else or get control to do as they please?” Nancy said, “For one, there’s a possibility they could find us anyways.”

“And what if they appear near unsuspecting people? We can’t risk someone else getting attacked by them,” Billy continued.

“We need somewhere we can prepare and fight and hold them off until they save El,” Nancy added.

Jonathan let out a shaky breath. “If they don’t—”

“No, we’re not thinking like that,” Nancy growled out. “We’re going to hold them off and Dr. Owens is going to save her. End of story.”

Billy forced himself into a similar mindset as Jonathan and Steve bit back their comments and simply followed their lead. Once in the lobby, the group rushed outside and into Steve’s car since it was the least boxed in. As Steve started to drive, the rearview mirror started to warp as well.

Billy didn’t hesitate to rip it down and throw it out the window. Steve let out a small groan that would have been funny if Billy wasn’t scared half to death.

Steve’s place was closest and they went there, Steve rushing into his garage and immediately running into his house to grab his bat. Billy eyed a crowbar in the corner. Snatching it up, he followed the rest into the house.

“Does your dad have a gun?” asked Nancy.

“In my parents’ closet. Box on the floor and in the back,” Steve shot back, rushing to where his bat was.

Jonathan ran to the kitchen and grabbed the largest steak knife he could find, quickly going back into the living room. He pointed behind Billy. “It’s happening again.”

Billy nodded, having already felt the pull. “Let it come,” he growled back, steadying his stance and tightening his grip on the crowbar.

There was no way to know if mentally and physically prepping himself for this would change anything but he had to try. It sure as hell was better than sitting on his ass.

Seconds later Nancy came running down the stairs and Steve appeared next to her with their respective weapons in their hands. Nancy stood next to Billy and watched the continually warping screen.

“You ready?” murmured Nancy.

“No idea,” Billy muttered.

“The window!” Jonathan suddenly yelled out and they all looked to see the window warping as well.

Nancy turned and Billy could feel her pressed against his back. Steve was by his side, Jonathan facing the other way.

On the TV, the screen stretched farther and farther as it became more clearly human. The hand revealed an arm and then a shoulder. The fingers hit the ground, the sheen of the television screen washing away and revealing flesh and clothes.

Billy’s grip tightened and he forced himself to stay still. Just a little bit more...

He didn’t get a chance to make the first move. A resounding screech had them all covering their ears. Glass flew outwards, the shards slicing their skin and embedding themselves in pillows and chairs.

When Billy opened his eyes again, he saw himself standing there, the him from the dark place. The copy, the fucking pod person. But they weren’t all the way through. He stood there but that connection Billy had felt to it hadn’t disappeared. There was something still keeping the other him tethered to the dark place, almost like there was a delay. They weren’t able to bring their full bodies in one go, only parts. First fungi and the pods like fingers, and now these freaky things were like the heads and torsos. But it wasn’t all of them. There was still time. Billy didn’t know if the pod people had to do something here to fully come through, like get to Jane or activate



some bogus ritual, or if it was just a matter of time before they were fully through and it didn't matter what Billy did.

All he knew was there was a chance that holding them off could give Dr. Owens more time to help Jane and that was all that mattered.

The other him looked over them with a bland expression.

"They think they can hold us off." It was Nancy's voice but Billy didn't have to look back to know Nancy hadn't spoken.

"They think they can kill us," The other him said.

"They can't."

"They won't."

"Like fucking hell we won't," growled Billy. They may have gotten them with that glass shattering sound but he went in for the second hit, swinging as hard as he could.

The crowbar didn't connect with anything solid though. The thing dodged, not by moving out of the way, but by warping around the crowbar. Billy stumbled, the force of his strike no longer directed at anything. He didn't have time to real himself back as the other him reeled its fist back and slammed it into Billy's face.

"Fuck!"

"Dodge this," growled Nancy.

A shot rang out and one quick look showed the other Nancy flying back, her spine cracking as she fell in half. Her feet remained planted on the ground though and after several hair-raising noises, her spine popped back into place. There was no sign of an entry wound in her forehead.

"Shouldn't worry," said other Nancy.

"Don't worry," agreed other Billy. "You won't be gone. We'll be you."

"Screw that," Billy shot back. He swung high just as Steve swung low.

As if it turned to rubber, the other Billy moved around the weapons. He tried to hit Steve but Steve quickly moved back. Another shot was fired from Nancy and Billy could hear Jonathan's labored breathing as he attempted to cut the things.

"Are we doing anything!?" asked Steve.

"No fucking idea," growled Billy. "But we can't stop now."

---

"Joyce, get the kids out of here! Now!" yelled Jim. "And someone get Doc!"

Mike struggled against Joyce's grip. "El! I won't leave her side! I—"

"Mike you need to leave now," growled Jim. He picked Mike up before he could try and argue more. He understood the kid's worry but they needed the room. "I'm sorry Mike but you need to stay here!"

Jim slammed the door and rushed back to Jane's side. The only reason she wasn't screaming anymore was because her throat was too raw. In the last few minutes, it had only gotten worse. She was so hot it practically hurt to touch her but Jim picked her up all the same, kissing her forehead and holding her close.

Not long after, Dr. Owens burst into the room, files falling from under his arms. "I may have found something but we have to hurry!"

"What?! What is it?!" yelled Jim.

"A strong enough electrical shock to the right part of her brain could shut off her abilities to connect to the dark place," Dr. Owens hurriedly said. He flipped through pages fast and quick, desperately looking for something.

"Do it then!"

"If I get this wrong I could kill her! This requires time—"

"Which we don't have!"

Jane let out a pained moan. She was shaking hard, tears streaming down her face and burning Jim to the touch. "Please..."

Jim didn't know what she was begging for. For Doc to hurry up, for him to take her pain away, for her to just die, Jim didn't know.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he whispered. There wasn't anything else he could say.

Dr. Owens went over the papers, throwing away anything that couldn't help.

Every second that seemed to pass Jane became hotter and despite how torn her throat was, she started to scream again.

"Hurry!"

"Hold on! Hold-found it!"

"Do it!"

He couldn't lose another daughter. Dear god, no not this. Anything but this.

"Strap her down!"

"Ahhh!"

Jane started to struggle now, arms flailing as Jim forced her back against the bed.

"Please! Please!"

"It'll be over soon! I promise! I promise sweetheart, just stay strong!"

"Hopper!" she cried.

"I'm here! I'm here-Doc!"

"I'm going as fast I can!"

Jim pulled the straps over her. Jane arched her back, still trying to get up but she was pressed fast against the bed.

“I need to shave her head.”

“What!?”

“This is not up for debate! If I have any god damn hope of getting this right we need to shave her head so I know where the hell I’m aiming!” yelled Dr. Owens.

“Fine!”

Dr. Owens pulled out a razor and went to work as quickly as possible. Jane struggled but Jim held her down even as his skin started to blister.

“Ahhhhh!!”

“Hurry!”

Jane’s locks fell onto the white sheets and floor. Dr. Owens grabbed an instrument, wheeling it around and pulling out a chord. He screwed something off, grabbing a large needle and putting it in its place. He turned back, grabbing papers and mumbling numbers and words to himself that Jim couldn’t understand as he turned knobs and pressed a button.

A buzzing noise grew alongside Jane’s scream.

“Doc!”

“Hold her still Pops!”

“Stay strong for me! You can do that! Hold on sweetheart!” Jim tightened his grip on her head. He could feel her struggling harder and harder. Around them pieces started to fly, the lights started to buzz with the machine. The room looked stark white and his skin felt charged. Jim’s hair started to stand and the palms of his hands were going from bright red to maroon. It was like trying to hold the sun.

They started to char.

Dr. Owens wiped down her skin before his fingers carefully moved over her shaved skull.

“Should be right here. Right here.”

“Sam!!!”

“Shut up Chief!”

Tears flowed freely.

“H-Ho-Hopp-per!”

“Stay strong! Just a little longer and then the pain will go away! Just a little longer!”

Owens’ finger continued down. It stopped on a specific spot and he quickly marked it with a black marker.

He picked up the needle.

The knob was turned again.

“Sam!”

“Hold her now!”

Jim’s knuckles went white from the pressure as he kept her head down.

Dr. Owens’ flicked a switch.

“Now!”

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!!!”

Everything rose, Jim was pretty sure he even got an inch or two off the ground. The lights flared and the main bulb burst. Everything crashed to the ground and Dr. Owens slipped the needle out, quickly grabbing gauze to patch up the wound.

Right away her temperature started to go down. Jim’s hands were so badly burned that he couldn’t even feel anything. His hands shook as he pulled the straps off her and pulled her up. “Jane. El...sweetheart don’t...don’t do this...”

Dr. Owens took a step forward. “Jim...”

“*Jane!*”

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Other Nancy grabbed Steve’s head, slamming it again and again against the wall.

“Get off him!”

Billy tried to grab the thing but nearly fell on top of Steve instead as it slipped from him and moved around.

“Argh!”

Billy launched himself forward when it suddenly hit him. The feeling that connected him to the pod people, that had been telling him they hadn’t come all the way through. The feeling was at the forefront of his mind, overpowering and un-ignorable only now the feeling was being torn from him like someone was ripping off his own face.

He could hear Nancy’s scream matching his and what little glass hadn’t broken shattered now.

Billy collapsed, the pain just too much. Blood was flowing between his fingers from where his hands pressed against his ears, trying to block out the pain. His head shook from the effort as he looked up and the other Nancy and Billy burst into shards, hitting the ground like ice hitting metal. The sound resonated through him and then—

Silence.

“Nancy! Oh god Nancy are you alright!”

At least for a few seconds anyways.

Billy groaned as he pushed himself onto his hands and knees, Jonathan pulling Nancy to her feet. She wobbled, blood on her hands and around her ears as well. She was pale but alive.

He let out another long sigh and glanced behind him only to have all relief disappear again. Billy scrambled across the broken remnants of

Steve's first floor, not caring what dug into his hands or knees.

"You are not fucking doing this to me Harrington!"

Billy grabbed Steve's arm and pulled him closer. He grabbed hold of his shoulder and eased into a sitting position, Steve's head now in his lap. He pressed his fingers to his neck first. A pulse, thank god. He then pulled him closer, brushing his hair out of his face, mindful of the cuts there.

"Steve, come on man. Wake up. You're fucking alive so wake up!"

Billy shook him, Steve blearily opening his eyes in response.

"Urgh...you didn't have to do that," mumbled Steve.

Billy ignored his words and pulled him into a hug, closing his eyes and resting his chin on Steve's shoulder. To think that he'd just fought off pod people with Steve fucking Harrington. Billy laughed from the insanity of it all and pulled back, but only enough so he could see Steve's face.

"Don't ever fucking pull that shit on me again. Ok?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "Christ, it's not like I planned to get my nose broken and my face smashed into a wall," he said, wiping at the blood on his face.

"Don't fucking do it again."

"Billy—"

"I mean it," Billy cut in. His breath was shaky, hands moving up to cup Steve's face. "Don't...don't leave me like that."

Steve looked at him like he was searching for something. Billy wasn't sure what for and he feared that he couldn't give Steve what he was looking for. Would he actually—but the thought stopped before it even got fully started. No, Steve wouldn't do something like that. Billy knew that now. After all, if he couldn't trust the guy he'd just fought with against his own alien counterpart, then who could he ever really trust?

Though Billy realized he didn't need any assurance, Steve still proved him right after getting over a cough. "I'm not fucking leaving you. You're stuck with me. With us I mean. You know, this family. You're stuck," Steve said with a half smile.

"Somehow I don't mind," Billy sighed before throwing back his head and letting out a victory shout.

Steve sat up though he still leaned against Billy's leg as he looked at him. "They're gone?"

"They are," Nancy quickly said, looking at both Steve and Jonathan.

Billy nodded. "We could feel it. Their connection was broken and they fell back to the dark place." He snapped his fingers. "Just like that."

Jonathan murmured, "And if the connection was broken..."

Billy jumped to his feet, fully remembering what that meant and all feelings of victory gone. "The kid. We gotta get back to the Lab!"

He pulled Steve to his feet and they rushed out of the destroyed house. Billy grabbed the keys from Steve since he wasn't in a state to drive and jumped in the driver's seat instead. He floored it out of the neighborhood. Once coming upon the Lab, he looked at everyone else. "Anyone want to fucking wait for someone to come down?"

"No way," growled Nancy. "We need to get in there now."

Steve looked towards the back seat. "Wait what do you-argh! Really?!"

"No time Steve!" Billy yelled out.

Thankfully the airbags hadn't gone off when he drove through the lobby, the impact not so strong that anyone was actually injured. Without even turning the car off, Billy jumped out, running towards the stairs instead of waiting. He didn't bother to see if anyone else was following, just thinking of that little kid and what it could mean if the monsters' gate was closed. He couldn't have a kid die. Not for him or all people.



Billy rushed down the hallway, spotting the cluster of kids and Joyce outside one of the rooms.

Joyce jumped upon seeing him. "Billy! Are you all—"

"Wait!" yelled Dustin. "You're not supposed to go in—"

Billy rushed by them though, bursting into the destroyed room. He froze in place, feeling the presence of everyone else quickly coming up behind him. He just looked at the Chief's tear streaked face, the Doc's exhausted one. He looked as Hopper pulled up the pale and limp body and—

And Jane opened her eyes.

"El!"

The kids rushed around Billy to get to her and he let them. She was alive. That's all he'd needed to see as his shoulders slumped in relief. He could feel Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan come up behind him as all the kids cried over her. Everyone was just in utter relief for the moment but once it quieted, Jane looked over at Billy and Nancy and murmured, "Safe?"

"Safe," Billy softly agreed. "You saved us Eleven."

"You're safe," Jane sighed in relief, her eyes turning back to her friends.

Billy wiped at the tears on his face and when he felt Nancy's hand enclose his, he gripped it tight.

For a while, they all rested against each other, thankful they'd all somehow made it. Max hugged Billy tight once she had reassured herself that Jane was alright. She hugged him round the middle and murmured, "Thanks for coming back."

"Thanks for being here for me," replied Billy.

The adrenaline high after beating the pod people started to disappear and after a moment longer, Dr. Owens finally got up and came round to Billy and the others. "You kids look like you've seen hell."

“So do you Doc,” Billy replied.

“True, but I’m not covered in cuts and bruises. How about I get you all fixed up?”

They nodded gratefully as they left to give the kids some more privacy. Joyce came with them, babying not just her son but all of them, even Billy. He wasn’t as surprised by her kindness now, knowing that it was just the kind of woman she was. Besides, he liked the babying. It felt good to feel cared for, especially right now.

Once they were all patched up, Dr. Owens offered some rooms at the Lab that they could prep for the night. They all agreed. Billy sure as shit didn’t feel like driving all the way back to Steve’s and dealing with the possible shit show there and he was sure the others felt the same.

Because of that, he and Steve ended up in one room, Nancy and Jonathan in another. Once alone, they were both in their shirts and boxers in two hospital style beds that they’d pulled the sidebars down and shoved together. It was that unspoken agreement that they’d been keeping, only this time Billy decided it shouldn’t be unspoken any longer. It seemed world ending situations were just the number one way to give him any bravery.

“Some would probably call this weird, right?” Billy started as he watched Steve sit down.

Steve shrugged. “I guess. A lot of people would probably say that it’s pretty damn weird that half of my friends are about four years younger than me. Or you know, the whole pod people thing. That was pretty damn weird too.”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Yeah but...we’re not fucking twelve and just...”

“Billy, I already told you. They wouldn’t care.”

“I’m not talking about the kids and Nancy,” sighed Billy.

Steve looked at him in surprise. “Oh. Then what are you talking about?”

Billy ran a hand through his hair, trying to think of the right way to say it. Pod people, alternate dimensions, stopping basically an alien invasion, it just changed one's perspective on everything. And seeing Steve there and unconscious before he'd known he was still alive, Billy just knew he couldn't lose this. The bond that they'd formed, Billy didn't want to lose it, not just in general but to anyone else.

He looked at Steve and grabbed hold of him. This time wasn't an attempted goodbye though. This wasn't about pushing away but actually pulling closer.

When Steve pressed his hands against his chest though, Billy paused, wondering if he'd misread everything.

However, Steve just rolled his eyes and said, "You should ask first you know, before you just go around kissing people."

"Uh...right. Can I—"

"Damn it, yes Billy!"

"Then why'd you fucking stop me?" he laughed.

Billy pulled Steve in for a real kiss this time. He was mindful of the bandages on his face and his broken nose. It was only those thoughts that kept him from shoving him against the mattress.

"Fuck," muttered Steve as they moved away.

"You should say that more often," smirked Billy. "It sounds good on your lips."

"I have six kids, remember? I'm trying to set a good example."

"Of course, how could I forget," laughed Billy. He ran his hand through his hair again, some of the strands falling in front of his face. Looking between them, he added, "You...what are we doing?"

"We didn't know before. Why should we know now?"

Billy rolled his eyes. "I'm trying to be...I don't know. Fucking responsible I guess? I just...I don't—"

“Go on a date with me.”

“Fucking where?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Steve shrugged. “Don’t worry so much.”

“Shouldn’t I be telling the mom that?”

“Probably but you could learn to chill out a little too,” smiled Steve.

Billy laughed and flopped back against his pillow. “You’re probably not wrong,” he agreed. He closed his eyes and let out a tired sigh. He felt the bed shift as Steve lied down too.

“Hey, it’s over ok? It’s finally over.”

“But it’s not.”

“Did...do you feel...?”

Billy opened his eyes. “What? No! No not those things. I mean... there’s still my dad...”

“If we can beat god damn pod people, we can beat your piece of shit dad,” responded Steve. “We’re all going to be by yours and Max’s side. We’re not leaving you and Hopper is going to do everything he can to keep you two safe.”

“I...you know what? I think I finally fucking believe you.”

“Believe it or not, I’m right a good bit of the time,” smirked Steve.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Pompous much?”

“Only a bit. Left over from my King Steve days probably.”

Billy laughed until he paused, mind going back to Steve’s house. “Your living room—”

“No. Don’t you dare bring that up,” snorted Steve. “We are ignoring everything else until we wake up tomorrow. Got it? Everyone’s ok, the pod people are gone, I just want to have a peaceful night’s rest without thinking about how my parents are going to shit themselves

once they find out I destroyed the downstairs TV.”

“Fine but...can I kiss you again before we do pass out?”

Steve snorted and then gave Billy a ‘duh’ look. “Hell yes.”

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The next few days involved everyone doing damage control what with all the missing kids and the police calls that had come in about Steve’s utterly wrecked home (apparently the shots and breaking glass had been heard by nearby neighbors). Dr. Owens was also very thorough in making sure Jane, Nancy, and Billy were alright and healing nicely along with bandaging up Jim’s burned hands.

When Jane was stronger, she tried to levitate a spoon and did so successfully. However, when asked to find Nancy’s and Mike’s mom, she was unable to go back to the dark place. It meant those parts of her powers were likely all blocked or completely destroyed for her but no one was complaining since it meant everyone was now safe.

After Jim managed to cover up the calls that had been made about the noise at Steve’s house, everyone had gone there to help clean up and to replace what they could. There was no way Steve would be able to get a new TV but at least everything else was fixed once they’d finished cleaning.

After that, Nancy was finally able to go home after an entire summer spent at the Lab as the other kids ran off to their parents as well.

Jim somehow managed to smooth everything out over about a week and at the end of it, he found himself sitting with Dr. Owens at the same bar where he’d passed over Jane’s freedom.

“Everything going well at the Lab?” asked Jim.

Dr. Owens nodded. “Very well. We’re shutting things down, sending in final reports. It should be completely empty again by the end of the month.”

Jim sighed in relief. “Thank god. I was starting to get afraid that you guys would stick around again. And I doubt we could have gotten rid of you a second time.”

“Well actually...”

“Listen Doc. I trust you, perhaps twice as much as before considering what you did for me, but—”

“I know,” interrupted Dr. Owens. “Which is why I’ve been thinking about going into the private sector.”

“You...you’re kidding me right?”

“No. I think I’m done dealing with government goons for the rest of my life.”

“And you’re retiring here?”

“Something like that. If the citizens don’t mind of course.”

“I sure as hell don’t see why not,” smirked Jim. “It would definitely fucking help if I didn’t have to risk a whole government agency coming down on my ass the next time something strange happened.”

“Exactly my thinking. And what with this town’s record, I think it would be stranger if nothing odd happened here,” Dr. Owens replied.

“To true,” sighed Jim. He leaned back as the waitress passed them their food.

Once she was gone, Dr. Owens added, “How’s Jane?”

“Just fine. She was down about her hair being gone again but it’s starting to grow and I promised to get her a nice wig before school starts. Something that matches what her hair will actually look like.”

“And you’ve gotten her registered?”

“Yep.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” smiled Dr. Owens. “She deserves a good life. And those kids will help look out for her too.”

Jim nodded. “Those kids don’t take away all my worry but they sure as hell help.”

“Speaking of the kids, I got that phone number of the attorney I mentioned to you. I talked with her and she’s more than happy to help completely pro-bono,” said Dr. Owens as he slid a card across the table. “She won’t lose the case.”

“I just keep having to tell you thanks, don’t I?” snorted Jim. “Better you than someone I don’t like, huh?”

“Very true,” Dr. Owens said. “And tell Mr. Hargrove when you see him that he does need to come in next Tuesday. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“If I could brand that saying on Billy’s forehead I would,” snorted Jim. “But don’t worry, I’ll make sure he comes in.” He took a bite of his sandwich and after swallowing it, asked, “So where you going to hole up? I’m sure you’re richer than me Doc but I doubt you have enough to just run your own experiments in this area and leave it at that.”

Dr. Owens shrugged. “I’ll just have to see what opportunities are presented to me.”

Jim nodded in agreement. He finished up his lunch with Dr. Owens, taking joy in the simple engagement as he knew full well what he’d have to do afterwards.

After their extended cruise, Steve’s parents were finally coming home in two days and it was long overdue that Max and Billy gave proper statements. Despite the number Dr. Owens had given and the scales being tipped in their favor, Jim knew this wasn’t going to be easy for anyone.

With lunch done, Jim drove over to Steve’s. Joyce met him there and they went up to the front door together. Steve let them in and Billy and Max quickly appeared, anxiety clear on their face. They appeared more worried than during the final fight with the pod people.

“This might take a while so let’s sit down. Ok kids?” Jim suggested.

Billy and Max nodded, slowly sitting down as Hopper sat in front of them with Joyce beside him. Steve quickly crossed the room and sat on the same couch as the siblings.

“Ok, first things first, while the trial is going on, Max you’ll be put into child protective services.” Jim watched both Billy and Max immediately bristle but he held up his hand. “Let me say everything before you two start trying to argue with me. Ok? Max, you would only be with them about a week, maybe two.”

“I’ve already applied to be a foster parent,” Joyce added. “We’ve cleaned out the spare room and we should be able to house you until you can go home. You’re of course welcomed there too Billy.”

“And it’s only temporary,” Jim assured. “Once your mother is considered a fit parent by the courts, you’ll be able to go back to her. Obviously Billy, you’ll be free to do whatever you want.”

“But you’re welcomed to stay with us as long as you need,” Joyce threw out.

“Anyways,” Jim continued, “we are assuming this is going to trial. Because of that, you both need to get your story completely straight. Max, since you were actually there when possessed Billy assaulted Neil, we can spin this as Billy attacked out of panic and a fear for his life and ran. Over the next few weeks, you were helping him stay hidden and when Neil assaulted you, you ran to your step-brother knowing he could keep you safe.”

“Should I change that story?” asked Max.

“No, no that part’s fine,” said Jim. “We’re going to say you, Steve, were housing both of them because we want to assure the jury that you, Billy, weren’t putting Max in any danger either. We’ll also be able to use Steve as a character witness in regards to your injuries Max and the danger of Neil. I can’t say for sure but hopefully Susan will find the courage to add testimony against Neil but as of right now, what happened to you in the past Billy is our most affective bullet.”

Jim watched as Billy stilled at that. His shoulders went tight and his mouth turned from a hard line to a pained frown. Steve gently put his hand over one of Billy’s though and Billy managed to let an unsteady breathe. He nodded.



“Just tell what happened back then,” Jim gently said. “That story will be proven by the x-rays and other records from the hospitals.”

“And if he’s actually found guilty?” asked Billy.

“The most we can hope for is twenty years in jail with a possibility of parole in ten,” Jim admitted. “But you’ll both be adults by then and out of his reach. I can help you both get restraining orders on him as well if we think it’s necessary or his sentencing turns out lighter than we want.”

“How are we going to go to the police?” asked Max.

“I think it’s a good idea to have Steve drive you both in tomorrow.”

“And then I’ll be forced to go with some bastard?” Max grumbled.

“Please try not to call the social worker that to their face. They’re just doing their job,” sighed Jim. “And remember, it’s only for a little while and you’ll probably even get a free full day or two before a social worker even comes. You’ll be fine.”

Max eased a little after that. She looked away for a moment before glancing back at Jim. “We’ll have to see him again. Won’t we?”

“He will be in the court room, yes. He’ll probably even give his own testament on what happened,” Jim continued. “Your attorney will tell you more about the proper way to act in a court room, you too Steve since you’ll be a witness, but you need to stay calm and you can’t get angry. Even if Neil says something you know is wrong. If the stress gets to you, look at me. I’ll be there every day.”

“Or me,” Joyce added. “And you know the kids will be supporting you both every day you have to be there as well.”

“We have an attorney?” Billy quickly asked.

“Yes, Doc helped you get her. And she’s doing it pro-bono so you don’t have to worry about paying a penny,” Jim replied.

“Anything else we need to know?” asked Max.

"I think that's it for now. Just keep what I said in mind and you'll both be fine," Jim replied.

"Will we have to stay at the sheriff's department all day tomorrow?" asked Max.

"No, we wouldn't do that to you. Assuming social services doesn't appear out of nowhere, it'll be alright for you both to go to Joyce's house for the night."

Joyce nodded in confirmation.

"Any questions?"

Billy and Max shook their heads. Jim looked to Steve and he murmured a soft, "No."

"Good, in that case the only thing I need to say now is Billy, make sure you go to your appointment with Dr. Owens next week, ok? Otherwise don't worry. You kids will do fine. It'll be ok," Jim said again as he stood up. He put his hat back on and tipped the brim. "I'll see you both tomorrow."

As he left with Joyce, she said, "Do you think there's a chance Neil could walk?"

"If he gets a good enough attorney? It's possible," sighed Jim. "You know I'll do whatever I have to in order to keep them safe."

"I know Hop. I'd do the same," Joyce said with a hard nod.

"Glad to see we're on the same page," sighed Jim as he said his goodbyes and left Joyce at her car to go to his truck.

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Max closed her eyes.

"We can't—"

"I know," she whispered, interrupting Steve. "Just, a few more seconds. Please?"

“Yeah...yeah ok.”

Max took a few more deep breaths, gripping the backseat as tightly as she could. Despite the pod people having been gone for days now, she hadn't exactly had a break before having to go through with this. She'd been worried constantly about Jane, she still was even now. And part of her had worried that Billy and Nancy might just drop dead without warning, no one fully understanding their broken connections with their pod people versions.

She and Billy had already prepared their story about the day that Neil had been assaulted so they didn't have to worry there. She had everything memorized forwards and backwards and was a good enough actor to know she couldn't repeat it exactly word for word, it wouldn't sound natural then. The interview she was going to have to go through wasn't the issue though.

Despite how she was dealing with the normal world again, Max honestly felt more afraid about the outcome of this than anything supernatural. She was just too out of her element and felt too powerless.

One look at Billy in the front seat showed that he was thinking the same thing. He reached back and squeezed her hand.

“We've got this sis. We can do it.”

Max smiled. If Billy was saying that, then Max could actually believe it. As she let go of Billy's hand, she looked around and noted how empty the area was. It was still pretty early and only the cars of those that were already in work populated the lot.

There weren't any people and she glanced back to Billy and Steve.

“You know you can do your gross stuff or whatever before we go in, right?”

Billy jolted. “What?!”

Max rolled her eyes. “We've all been living in the same house. I've noticed. Go on, get it over with.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” snorted Steve. “Haven’t you kissed Lucas?”

Max’s cheeks turned slightly pink. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Steve laughed before quickly looking around. He seemed to find just what Max had seen as he quickly grabbed Billy’s neck and pulled him in for a quick kiss. Though Billy was still tense up until that moment, Max noted how Billy’s shoulders fell once they moved away from each other and his face smoothed.

“I can do this,” he whispered.

Steve nodded. “You can. You both can. Remember, I’m coming in with you and if they let me go first, then I’ll meet you at Joyce’s. Got it?”

Max and Billy nodded.

“Come on then. Better to get it over with than just wait.”

They climbed out of their car and headed towards the station. Max had already prepared herself to see her mother since she was still a minor and was supposed to have a trusted adult with her during any interview. She hoped that her mother wouldn’t try to defend Neil in there, it would make Max’s interview only more difficult. However, she kept repeating the words she needed to say in order to reassure herself.

As expected, it took everyone in the office a few seconds to realize the importance of the two teens and kid that had just walked through their doors. When Hopper showed up, Max had to hide her smile, wanting to laugh at his exaggerated surprise. However, she sobered when she was placed in a separate interview room and even more so when her mother finally showed. The reunion might have been bittersweet at the very least except Max saw who had come with her.

“Maxine! Oh god we’ve looked everywhere for—”

Max screamed. It was the quickest way to draw attention and to get away from Neil. Not only that but she thought of it quickly, figuring her reaction would bring some sympathy towards the possible jurors

if it came to that.

Her scream got the reaction she'd wanted and she found herself in a room with only Hopper, Neil and her mother far away.

"That was good thinking kid," sighed Hopper, "We should have figured he'd come with her but...well I was hoping it would just be your mother. We need an adult with you though. A family member if possible and—"

"Why not Billy?"

"We didn't exactly discuss this—"

"He's eighteen. He's not a minor and he is my brother legally," replied Max. "Why not?"

Hopper leaned back, his arms crossed as he thought it over. "Alright. I'll have an officer sit with you while we interview Billy first. Then I'll bring him in and we'll interview you. Ok?"

Max nodded.

"Alright. I'll be back soon," promised Hopper.

He left and soon a police officer came in that Max vaguely recognized. She'd probably seen him around town and she ignored him during the dull minutes that passed by. The moment that Billy came in though, Max rushed to his side and hugged him tight.

"Did you see him?" she desperately asked.

"No. Hopper told me though," Billy replied with a shiver. "Are you ok?"

Max nodded. "He didn't have time to do anything."

"Thank fuck," muttered Billy. He looked back at Hopper. "Now this again?"

"Afraid so," Hopper replied as he gestured for them to sit down.

Max and Billy did so and though the whole thing was annoying and tedious, it thankfully didn't take long. Afterwards, they had to wait in the room by themselves for a bit but when Hopper came back, Max immediately knew it was to good news.

"Turns out Neil coming here made this a hell of a lot easier on us," sighed Hopper. "He's been charged with two degrees of child abuse and one of child neglect. We're getting a court date set and it looks like it'll be next Thursday at the earliest."

"And the social worker?" asked Billy.

"Won't be here until Sunday. It gives you both two days at the Byers'."

Max relaxed at that. "Can we go now?"

"You can. Joyce is waiting out front and all other paperwork is my job."

"Steve?" asked Billy.

"Already out of here."

They nodded and left through the open door that Hopper held for them. As they left the building, Max could hear her mother's voice from some room. Part of her wanted to run to her but she held off the want and held onto Billy's hand instead. Joyce met them outside and hugged them tightly.

"I'm so proud of you both," Joyce kindly said. "You're being so brave. Everyone's waiting at the house for you."

"Everyone? Even Nancy?" asked Billy with a small smile. "Isn't she under house arrest or something?"

"She is but I managed to get her a day pass," chuckled Joyce. "I meant it. Everyone."

"Even...Jane?" asked Max.

"Well she is registered for school this year so I'd say it's about time

she comes out of that cabin don't you?"

Max's face immediately brightened up. "Definitely!" Max agreed.

They got in and Joyce drove them through town. It felt good knowing that she didn't have to hide anymore. She and Billy had taken the first step and now it was almost over.

Just as Joyce had promised, everyone truly was there, except of course Hopper who had to deal with the remaining paperwork.

Max ran to Lucas and hugged him tight and then Jane next. "How are you?" she asked.

"Good," Jane murmured. "Hair is growing again."

Max nodded encouragingly. "You'll have curls in no time."

"Safe now?" asked Jane.

Max winced slightly. Lucas said, "They're going to have to go to court. It's like a bunch of people that decide whether or not Billy and Max are lying or not."

"But they're not."

"Yeah, well that's justice for you," snorted Dustin.

"Don't worry," Mike quickly said, "they'll be fine. It'll just take a bit more time."

"And then home?" asked Jane.

Max nodded. "I'll get to go home afterwards. Yeah."

"You'll be in school with me?"

"Yeah! I will!" Ironically, it was the mention of school that really had Max's spirits lifting but she latched onto the feeling all the same. She rushed off with them into the backyard, joking and making plans for the coming school year.

---

“Do you kids mind helping me with prepping lunch?” asked Joyce. “We’re going to have to make a Frankenstein of a table in the living room. There’s just not enough space in the dining room.”

“It’s no problem,” Steve smiled.

His interview hadn’t taken much time and upon getting to the Byers’ house, he’d helped Jonathan and Will get things ready to make food. Will had run off with the younger ones but Jonathan was still sticking around, Nancy and Billy now there to help too.

Steve continued to help in the kitchen as the others got the dining area ready for everyone. Joyce and him talked but it was mostly to mention what they’d just finished or when asking for something. Otherwise, it was a good break from the police interview he’d had to give. Steve focused on the simple motions of slicing and dicing for some time, up until Joyce asked for more than just a bowl.

“Hey, I was wondering if you could do something for me. You don’t have to of course but I feel you’re probably my best option,” Joyce admitted.

Steve looked at her curiously. “Shoot.”

“It’s just...I was wondering if you’d talk to Will. I feel that someone closer to his age and someone who isn’t his mother would just be better.”

“About what?” asked Steve.

“Well, I think it would just help if you talked a bit about you and Billy. I’m fairly sure everyone around here has guessed but from what I can tell, Will doesn’t have anyone to talk to in regards to things like that.”

“Um...”

“Oh! Oh my, am I not supposed to know?! Oh I’m so sorry honey. I didn’t mean to push,” Joyce quickly said.

“No it’s not-I mean-uh...just how did you know?”



“Well I had to work it out from a few sources, I’ll admit,” said Joyce. “Jonathan told me a few things and I heard Max talking to Will and Dustin at one point. And I mean, to be perfectly honest sweetheart you weren’t really hiding things when Hop and I came over the other day.”

“I guess that’s kind of my own fault,” admitted Steve with a sigh.

“Oh no! No don’t think of it like that. You both know you’re safe and loved here,” Joyce earnestly said, pausing in her work to take Steve’s hands. She gave him a kind smile. “But if you’re not ready to tell others...perhaps learn to be a little more coy, hmm?”

“Around others? Yeah that’s pretty sound advice,” chuckled Steve. “But uh...I mean...I guess I wanted to tell all of you but just...”

“It’s alright sweetheart,” Joyce replied as she rubbed his arm. “I’m happy for you. Both of you. And though I of course care about Billy like all of you, I think it’s good he has someone like you watching his back. He needs that.”

“Don’t I know it,” Steve replied. “Thank you Joyce. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to have this conversation with my mom.”

“It’s no problem at all sweetheart. You know I’m here for all of you,” Joyce smiled as she turned back to the food.

Steve did the same, only stopping when he remembered what had started the whole conversation. “I don’t mind talking to him...by the way. Can’t say I’ll be great at it but...I definitely don’t mind,” Steve smiled.

“Thank you Steve.”

“It’s no trouble Joyce,” Steve assured her.

They finished up in the kitchen as the others finally found enough chairs and then they came in to set the table. Jonathan went out back to call in the kids and soon the table was completely filled. A bottle of orange juice went round the table and plates were quickly grabbed and filled.

“Hope I didn’t miss anything.”

Everyone turned to the door as Joyce cried, “Hop! You managed to make it.”

“Just a quick lunch break but I figured why not,” Hopper chuckled. “Sure as hell healthier than the donuts they have down at the station huh?”

“You know I’d claim you’re a stereotypical small town sheriff,” snorted Billy, “but you also fight alternate dimensional monsters in your spare time so I guess it’s allowed.”

Some laughed as Hopper rolled his eyes. “Thanks kid.”

“How’d everything go?” Nancy quickly asked.

“As smoothly as can be expected,” Hopper replied. “We’ve got our first court date. This Friday at ten o’clock.”

“How will I get there if I’m stuck with a social worker?” asked Max.

“Someone will drive you down when it’s time,” Hopper said.

“We’ll all be there,” Lucas quickly said.

Will nodded. “School doesn’t start for another two weeks so we definitely will.”

“You’ll do fine,” Joyce repeated again. “I just know it.”

“Thanks,” smiled Max.

Billy nodded. “Yeah, thank you Joyce.”

“Not at all we’ll get through this,” Joyce agreed. “Now, about school...”

Some of the kids groaned while others excitedly talked about their plans, the conversation moving to lighter subjects and talk. Jonathan mentioned getting accepted on a scholarship to NYU for next year (since he’d planned a year off for Nancy), and him trying to figure

out whether or not he was going to go. When Billy was asked about his plans, he talked about looking for a temporary job around town, still not having much of an idea of what he was going to do. Steve shrugged his shoulders when asked and Hopper added, "You know you could always apply to be a deputy. It would sure as hell be a lot easier having someone around that actually knows what the hell's going on."

Steve laughed. "Me in uniform? I don't think so."

"Well the option still stands," chuckled Hopper.

"Don't hold your breath," replied Steve with a small smile.

---

Spending the day at the Byers' house had been a much needed break for Steve. Especially considering what happened when he got home.

After weeks of no parents, there they were, waiting in the living room for him with cross expressions. Considering what Hopper's cover-up story had been about, Steve couldn't help the exasperated sigh. He would have expected something a bit warmer at least.

"Hey mom, dad," he said.

"Steve, what is this we hear of a break-in?" asked his dad.

"They took the TV," his mother said with a strict tone.

"I wasn't home at the time. Sorry."

"At one in the morning?" his dad continued. "Where the hell were you?"

"At a friend's. I'm sorry."

"And did you do anything this summer?" asked his mother.

"Not much," Steve lied.

"You had everything ahead of you," his dad sternly said. "If you don't get your act together, we can't help you."

Steve bit back the responses he wanted to say. Some of his thoughts were pure irritation and sarcasm, but he also wanted to yell, "Excuse you! I'm a god damn hero who's fought off three different inter-dimensional beings!" However, knowing he didn't want to get thrown in the loony-bin, he sighed and fell on, "I'll figure it out."

"You better. You're carrying on the family name after we're gone and you'll be working with me soon," his father presumed.

His mother nodded in agreement. "We'd hoped you might have done something of use this summer."

God did he want to say something to that. "There's still time," sighed Steve.

"It won't stay that way. Keep that in mind son."

"I will sir. Can I head upstairs now?" Steve replied.

"Remember what we talked about."

"I will," Steve lied again, moving past them and up the stairs.

Once in his room, he collapsed onto his bed with a sigh. He missed Billy and Max already, missed getting up to make breakfast for them and playing Clue or Uno in the living room and watching movies late into the night. Perhaps if Steve was still in high school, wasn't two weeks away from turning eighteen, perhaps he'd be more upset at having to leave that all behind.

But in just two weeks he'd be as free as Billy and could really choose what he wanted to do. What that would be, Steve still had no idea. However, after the craziness of the summer, Steve did know he didn't want to leave the kids or really any of Hawkins. He also knew something like working for his dad was just too damn boring and infuriating but...well he would figure it out.

---

*They blended with the darkness that stretched on forever and timeless despite taking up no space.*

*The light of the organic gate was gone and they turned from it to search*

*elsewhere.*

*The wisps spoke despite how no sound echoed through the void.*

*“We know how to deal with an organic gate.”*

*“We should avoid an organic gate.”*

*“Organic gates can be closed. They can fight.”*

*“Another dimension then.”*

*“Something we can take more readily.”*

*“We leave it behind.”*

*“It was plentiful.”*

*“We go to easier pray.”*

*“The place is cataloged.”*

*“We will not go back.”*

*“There is food up ahead.”*

*“We go there.”*

*Nothing moved in the dark but they left it all the same, one version of Earth left behind and glowing just as brightly as it once had.*

## 10. The Trial

### Notes for the Chapter:

Well I wrote this and the epilogue together and I finished double-checking them so I'm just going to post them together. Enjoy!

Max had to go all the way to Chicago which was pretty damn stupid considering she had to go straight back to Hawkins in a few days for the trial. She'd hated leaving her friends and Billy behind. The social worker wasn't all bad but Max remained irritated and quiet the entire ride over. She barely spoke, more focused on what she would do when she got back to Hawkins than her current situation. She had to sleep on a crap bed which was honestly worse than the one Will's mom had set out for her, and she had to stay with kids that were dull and annoying and had absolutely no idea what the real world was like.

She ignored it all and just focused on Hawkins. At least until her case worker came to her with a proposition.

"Your mother's driven up here. She wants to speak with you."

Thinking about the pros and cons, Max asked, "She's alone right? Neil Hargrove's still in jail."

A nod.

"Yeah, I want to see her."

"I can come in if you—"

"No. I'm fine alone."

"Alright, just know I'll be outside the room at all times and all you have to do is call for me if you need anything."

Max resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the almost patronizing tone. She was fourteen now and had dealt with demodogs. Besides, if she wanted safety and comfort, the last place she'd look for it was in this

woman. With the goal of keeping things smooth here so that she could get back to Hawkins as soon as possible though, Max just nodded in understanding and went with her.

At first, her mom had filled her thoughts as Max worried about what could have happened if she'd called for her when Neil attacked. She'd worried that her mother might not have come at all. However, the pod people had put all those thoughts on hold. A small part of her still didn't want to talk to her mom but after dealing with her second alien encounter in less than a year, her mom was the one thing she desperately wanted.

Despite the unknown and apprehension she felt, Max ran into her mother's arms the moment she saw her. She noted the social worker closing the door behind her as she looked up at her mom.

Right away her mom tried but it was too much for Max. "I'm so-so sorry. I didn't know! I didn't—"

"Mom," Max softly begged, pushing back just a little.

"What? What is it Maxine? I'm so—"

"You knew," Max murmured. "We both did and we just stood and watched."

She watched her mother turn speechless. "I...Maxine it was—"

"You thought he wouldn't hurt you or me," sighed Max. She'd thought about this, the warped logic of the whole situation and she'd talked to Billy about it too. "Billy wasn't your son so he wasn't your focus. He gets it. He doesn't blame you or anything."

Her mother took a step back, clutching her hands to her chest. "It's-it's not that sweetheart. Maxine, I would have...Neil knew what he was doing with Billy but with you—"

"I'd be god knows where if it wasn't for Billy!" Max shot back. Technically that wasn't true. There were plenty of people she could have leaned on. However, she went with the words that would deliver the best punch and went best with the story she'd given police. "I have been stuck with Billy for most of the summer and he's

been the only person I could fully trust! You can't throw him under the bus!"

"I'm not Maxine. Of course I'm not."

"Then don't say he deserved it," hissed Max. She'd known where her mother's words were going and she couldn't bring herself to hear those. "I don't know what Neil told you but Billy didn't deserve it."

Her mom went in to try and hug her. "Maxine—"

"No!" It hurt pushing her away but Max stood her ground. She had to if only on this issue. "If you push Billy away, you're pushing me away too."

"What happened—"

"Is the truth," hissed Max. At least the only truth her mom needed to know. "I know...I know at first Neil was your answer to everything that went wrong with dad but...please don't try and make me change my statement. He hurt me and he hurt Billy. Whatever you saw in him...Billy deserves to feel safe and so do I."

Max finished in a whisper. She was hopeful but also so damn afraid. Would her mom refuse? Would she continue to defend Neil? Would she—

"I'm sorry Maxine."

Max looked up, noting the difference in tone. This wasn't some flashy apology.

"I should have...I never thought he'd ever hurt you. I thought he'd be the father figure you needed."

Several harsh comebacks came into Max's head but she bit her tongue. "I never needed one. I just needed you."

"And I'm here now! I wasn't before and I'm so...so sorry Maxine. But I won't allow you to be harmed again. I'll never let that happen again."



Max's shoulders finally relaxed. "I want to come home," she whispered.

"You will. After all this is over you will."

Max went in and hugged her mother, eyes squeezed tight as tears of relief fell from her eyes.

---

Jim looked over at Jane. "You want to get your wig on?"

"Why? We know it fits."

"Not to see if it fits," chuckled Jim. "We're going to support Max and Billy. We should look our best."

"So...we're going into town?"

"Yep."

"Town?"

Jim's heart both soared and broke just a little at Jane's wide eyes. "Yes in town. With people all around us. I'll take you to my favorite diner afterwards and I figured we might as well give the school a look since—"

He stopped as Jane rushed him, hugging him so tightly that Jim wondered if she was using her powers to do it.

"No more secrets?"

"Well, obviously if you get peeved you can't throw a kid across the room," Jim stressed.

"But what if—"

"No throwing kids. If you have to, punch them," snorted Jim. "But no psychic throwing."

Jane frowned but nodded. "Ok. And the cabin?"

"I don't want to come home one day and find the entire school is

here for a party but...no. The cabin isn't a secret anymore."

Jane's smile widened. "I'll get the wig on."

"You do that. We leave in ten."

Jim finished doing up his uniform, making himself a bit more presentable than normal since they were going to court. When Jane walked out, it was with her head of curls again. They were a bit too dark and not quite the same but it would work until her hair grew more.

"You ready kiddo?"

"Yes."

Jim took her hand and walked out of the cabin with her.

---

"Come here Billy," said Joyce, her tone muffled by the pins in her mouth.

Billy groaned. Will laughed and he shot the kid a glare but it wasn't even heated. Will just smiled again, hiding it behind his hands.

"Come here," Joyce demanded and Billy finally moved closer. Joyce stuck the pins in his hair, pulling it up into a makeshift bun that only looked slightly more acceptable. "Oh you are a mess. You're worse than Jonathan."

"Sorry," murmured Billy.

"No, no. No need for that. I don't mind fussing over you a bit," Joyce said with a kind smile. She started to fix his tie and ruffled suit. She had to redo the knot and stood back. "How does that look?"

Billy turned to the mirror and let out a small groan. On a normal day, he would have hated dressing up like some monkey but today he focused on it, distracting himself from the inevitable reunion with his father. He didn't think about the trial, instead pulling at his hair and trying to loosen the tie just a little. "God it's hideous."

Joyce turned him around and redid his tie. "I think you look like a respectable young man."

"Like I said, hideous."

Joyce chuckled and then tugged at his ear. "Take the earring out too. I think it's quite fashionable but it doesn't exactly go with the suit."

Billy rolled his eyes and did so, throwing it on the side table. "Better?"

"Much."

"You look like you work in an office," laughed Will.

"Cruel kid. Cruel," Billy replied. He looked at himself in the mirror again, let out an irritated sigh, and loosened his tie once more. Looking at Joyce, he added, "And Max and I can't sit with you guys?"

"I'm afraid so, court procedure and all that. You'll be with your lawyer but don't worry, we'll be right behind you. And my application was approved. Max should be able to come back here in a day or two."

Billy sighed in relief at that. "Good." He shook out his hands. "No way to put this off anymore, is there?"

"I'm afraid not sweetheart. But don't worry, we're all here for you. I know Nancy and Jonathan are already there."

Billy nodded and took another deep breath. To be perfectly honest, he wasn't ready. But then, he hadn't been ready for the pod people and he'd made it through that, hadn't he?

"Let's go."

---

Steve anxiously rubbed his hands. The court room was small and there certainly weren't many people interested in the outcome but what with their entire group being there along with some more police, some of the kids' parents, Max's mom, the social worker, and a few randos, the place was actually packed.

Billy and Max were outside the court room with their lawyer when the defendant walked in.

In that second, Steve realized he'd never actually seen Neil Hargrove. He looked like anyone. Maybe Steve had passed him on the street and had just never paid attention. It was entirely possible. The important thing was that Neil Hargrove looked like any dad and that's what the jury would see.

In the days leading up to the trial, he'd talked with Billy a bit more, getting a few small details from him. At one point Billy had broken, saying he was unable to go through with it, that his dad would kill him if he did. After calming down, he called his breakdown a moment of weakness. Steve wondered if it was only because he was there that Billy was able to calm down in the first place though. He reassured him it was understandable and completely alright. He was about to have to deal with his father in a way he'd never been able to. Of course the stress and anxiety of it all would get to him.

But because of that small breakdown, Steve knew more about the hospital visit. He knew about the broken ribs, the punctured and bleeding lung, the fractured skull. Only thirteen years old and he'd nearly drowned in his own blood.

Neil Hargrove, just an ordinary father as far as everyone was concerned right now and it wasn't until the trial actually began that they would know any better.

So, in order for no sympathy to be given to Neil, Steve had to reign himself in, not launch himself over the railing, and strangle the man to death.

One glance at the kids and Nancy showed they were going through similar responses.

The sound of the doors opening had everyone's heads spinning. Billy and Max stood frozen until their lawyer gently urged them on.

"Hey Max," Lucas whispered as she went by.

Will waved and Billy acknowledged it with a small one right back.

The judge came in and silence fell over the room. Steve instinctively grabbed hold of Jonathan who was on his right. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Nancy do the same thing and Jonathan simply squeezed both their hands in response.

---

The drive back had been long and tedious and even worse since Max had been put in a nice shirt and pants. Max hated having to dress nice but at least she wasn't stuck in an actual dress like for her mom's wedding or anything like that. Billy was clearly just as uncomfortable at her side and she gripped his hand under the table as opening remarks were made.

Max knew she wouldn't be the first to speak, there was even a possibility that she wouldn't have to speak today if the trial was put into a recess. But that didn't make it any easier.

Neil didn't even look at them, at least from what Max could tell. He seemed utterly comfortable, like there was no way he'd ever be put in jail. The confidence made her shiver. She wanted to believe he was too stupid to realize the level of shit he was in but at the same time... maybe he wouldn't be charged.

All she could really do was pray and to what, she had no idea. But it was a desperate attempt that Max wasn't above. By this point, she'd do anything to assure they'd never have to see Neil again.

She sat there as a timeline was established and the first part of character testimony began. Every moment that someone stood up for Neil, Max wanted to throw up. It didn't matter what version of Neil they knew, even if they only saw a simple man that was being wrongly accused. It still made Max sick and she wanted to get up and run out of the room.

It was worse every time she felt Billy tense next to her though. When that happened, she knew the person standing up there was lying out their ass. All Max could do was hold onto him and avoid looking at the piece of shit that defended Neil.

Steve went that day as well. For the most part, he just told the truth and kept all mentions of the Lab and pod people out of his story.

Seeing him do pretty well eased Max's fears of when she'd have to go up there.

When the defense asked for an extension of time in order to find their own expert to examine Billy's past injuries, Max could only close her eyes. What did it matter! From what Max could tell, any doctor with half a brain could tell the images on the old photos and x-rays hadn't been caused by falling down some stairs. Not unless those stairs were lined with spikes and god knows what else!

But the judge gave them that time and so they went into recess before their own lawyer could call a doctor to the stage. It meant they were done at about three o'clock and Max felt exhausted. All she'd done was sit there and she'd hated every second of it.

"The court will reconvene the following Tuesday at ten o'clock."

She had four more days of waiting just for this!? Max wanted to cry but she kept her head up high and tried to breath evenly. She'd have to go back with the damn social worker and even if Will's mom got the ok, she probably wouldn't be back in Hawkins until Monday.

The thought was a depressing one, especially since she'd only get a few seconds to hug everyone and tell them goodbye all over again.

When they all stood, Max could feel Billy's hand shift to her back. He was rubbing circles into it and though the gesture was appreciated, the fact that Billy's hands shook didn't exactly make it as comforting as she would have liked.

They watched Neil get taken away again, the cuffs put back on his wrists. Once that was over, their lawyer gave them a few more words and pointers for when it would finally be their turn to speak before leaving.

"Max, it's time to go," said her social worker from the other side of the railing.

"Give her a second," growled out Billy.

"Excuse me but—"

"I said give her a damn second," Billy hissed.

This time the woman seemed to listen and Max rushed by her and towards her friends. Of course they asked if she could stay longer and that hurt in its own right but she pushed it down and reminded herself soon. She'd be back soon. She talked briefly with her mother, gripping her tight and her mother promising she'd be home soon, but the last hug went to Billy right before she had to go.

"Thanks sis," Billy murmured.

"You too."

And with that, she left with her social worker, trying and failing not to glare at her every second she got.

---

"Who's this Chief? Haven't seen her around."

Jim smiled at the waitress and rubbed Jane's head. "Mine. I adopted her a little while back."

"Really? I didn't realize you were the kid type Chief. And what's your name?"

"Jane."

"Well it's very nice to meet you Jane. What can I get for you?"

"Waffles."

"And how many?"

"Lots."

"I think three is good for now," chuckled Jim just as all the other kids rushed into the booth. Mike squeezed in next to Jane, pushing Jim into the corner, and Dustin, Lucas, and Will jumped on the other side.

"The usual Denise," grinned Dustin.

"You got it kiddo. And everyone else?"

Hands shot up as they took turns. She left to start grabbing drinks as Jane looked around. "Max isn't here."

"She had to go back with the social worker," sighed Mike.

"But it looks like she'll be back and staying with us by Monday," Will added.

"Yeah, it's quicker than we thought," Lucas said, relief clear in his voice.

"So Chief," Dustin said as he caught the glass of orange juice that Denise slid towards him, "lay it on us. How's the trial looking?"

"Good so far. People tend to believe the kids first but it'll still come down to their testimonies," replied Jim.

"So there's still a chance?" asked Lucas.

"There always is. Even the most definite cases can unexpectedly be turned," Jim honestly answered.

"That could happen here?" murmured Jane.

"It can but you gotta think positive."

Dustin nodded. "If we start freaking out, the next time Max sees us she'll know we're freaking out and then she'll freak out and then we'll freak out more and it'll just be a continuous loop of freaking out!"

"Ditto," snorted Lucas.

"She'll be back though," Will said, reaching across the table to squeeze Jane's hand. "And if something happens we'll all protect her."

Jane nodded in agreement just as Denise started to come back with their food and Jane's large plate of waffles.

---

Steve felt Billy start to move so he removed his hand from his hair.



Billy was on his feet in seconds, pacing back and forth as he wiped away the tears.

“They’re all fucking liars! All of them!” He grabbed a few rocks, throwing them into the air. Steve listened to the delayed sound of them hitting the water at the bottom of the quarry.

He remained cross-legged, silently letting Billy get out his frustrations. They’d come here after the first day of the trial. Joyce had offered Billy a ride home but he’d declined, asking Steve if he knew anywhere quiet. Ever since Will’s fake body had been found in the area—and most people figured some John Doe had drowned because that made a lot more sense than a life-sized doll—the place had remained pretty quiet and it was far enough away from town that it was doubtful another car would come anywhere near them.

Billy had already gone through several quick emotional changes, though Steve could tell he was starting to simmer down overall. His tie was gone, having been thrown off in Steve’s car, and his hair fell loose again. His suit would have to get some magic done on it by Joyce considering their choice to sit but at least it wasn’t damaged.

The next time Billy walked near him, Steve reached up, grabbed his wrist, and pulled him down on his ass.

Billy let out an unintelligible grumble but didn’t get angry. He just let out an exaggerated huff and with it went the rest of his anger.

“Fucking Johnson, the prick that works with him, he knew he was lying out his ass for my old man. He fucking knew it,” sighed Billy.

“Yeah, well it’s not going to change the outcome. He’s going to jail.”

“But what if he—”

Steve stopped him with a kiss. They were still in the single digits and still really fucking uncertain but Steve got the reaction he was hoping for. Billy quieted, cheeks slightly pink once Steve pulled back.

“You need to try and stay positive. Just thinking about all the negatives is going to stress you the hell out,” said Steve.

Billy just nodded, rubbing at his eyes in frustrated motions.

“And Max will be back soon. Think of that as a positive too.”

“One big, fucked up family,” snorted Billy. “The good kind of fucked up though. I guess.”

Steve nodded in agreement as they turned to a moment of silence. The wind whistled through the area, the trees lush and bright. It was a good day with small, fluffy clouds peppering the blue sky. Steve noted it not because he'd grown suddenly conscious of nature but more so because he was still new to this thing with Billy and looking at their surroundings was easier. It was something he'd done on one of his first dates with a girl, awkwardly looking around and noticing everything else except her.

Of course, the awkwardness wasn't anywhere near the same level. He felt comfortable with Billy in the way that he still felt comfortable with Nancy. With her, he'd known how to physically react though. Now he felt Billy and he were both still kind of on edge, trying to figure out what was the way to go about it. The fact that they were completely alone though, not even the kids or Joyce nearby, did take away some of the anxiety. Because of that, Steve allowed himself to stay pressed against Billy's side, his warmth adding to that of the sun that shone from above.

“What do your parents think?”

“About what?” asked Steve.

“You going to court as a witness and everything. I mean, I'm guessing they know by now right?”

“Oh, yeah I briefly told them but I don't think they really noticed until my dad read a little blurb about the trial in the local paper. All he asked was if I thought you or Max had stolen the TV.”

Billy snorted. “Hiding from an abusive asshole so what do we do? Steal our savior's TV. Yeah, that's totally what happened.”

Steve laughed and bumped against Billy's shoulder. “So you think of me as your savior huh?”

“Fuck off, slip of the tongue.”

Steve just laughed again, this time going to rest against Billy and he could feel him relax against him.

“So any luck with the job hunting?” asked Steve.

“Not really. Most people aren’t looking for something as temporary as I’m thinking right now. May not hit anything. Doesn’t much matter though. I still have no idea what I’m doing next.”

Steve made a noise of acknowledgement. He wanted to know what that exactly meant. Would Billy leave once this was all over? Steve could understand why he would but that didn’t mean he wanted him to. He’d hoped he would come to the same conclusion as Steve had, that the good in Hawkins, the kids and Joyce and Hopper, were too great to leave behind. Steve wanted to know what was ahead, if this thing they were doing was going to go any further.

But that question was for a time when Billy wasn’t dealing with the damn trial so Steve kept his mouth shut and they continued to sit in the moment.

---

“How was Chicago?” asked Lucas.

“You been stalking me?” teased Max.

Lucas rolled his eyes leading Max to laugh. She replied, “It sucked. Hard. But It’s good to be back. It also means I don’t have to sit through one of those awful car rides.”

“Was the case worker that bad?” asked Will.

“I guess not...I mean, I get she was doing her job. But she wasn’t great,” sighed Max.

She sat on Joyce’s living room floor with Lucas and Will, having just got there at a little after nine. When she’d been given the ok to move in with the Byers, she’d insisted the social worker take her as soon as possible. Lucas had come over right away and the rest of them were supposed to show up soon.

Joyce came in with a thing of Pop Tarts for them for breakfast. Max quickly devoured hers as they tried to figure out something good to watch on TV. They were still flipping through channels when Billy walked in, clearly just having woken up. Max knew that Billy had been staying here but she hadn't realized he hadn't left already for the day. Because of that, it left an awkward moment of silence between them.

Max looked over to Lucas and then back to Billy, realizing the two had never really talked. Any relief in Billy's eyes at seeing Max was clearly overpowered by his want to bolt. Max jumped up before he could though. She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the living room before stopping and pointing at Lucas.

"Apologize."

"Max—"

"I'm serious Billy. Apologize," Max said, allowing a bit of bite to come into her tone.

"Shit, alright. Don't have to remind me of what happened here last time," Billy grumbled. Max stared at him as he shoved his hands into his pockets and finally mumbled, "Sorry for threatening you and shit."

"And," stressed Max.

"And throwing you into a wall."

"It was actually Joyce's cabinet," Lucas automatically replied.

Max rolled her eyes but continued to focus on Billy. "And you are sorry. Aren't you Billy?" Max stressed again. She could tell that he was thinking about it, thinking about his conversations with Max, their moments of fear and weakness when all they'd had were each other to understand. He was thinking about the moments they'd been honest with each other and she finally watched as Billy's face relaxed.

"I did a shit thing kid. I'm sorry," sighed Billy.

“Yeah, well the pod people really screwed you up so I guess we’re even.”

“Lucas!” Max glared.

“Naw I...I probably deserved that. Fair play.” The sound of a car coming into the driveway had everyone turning to look out the window. Billy ruffled Max’s hair. “That’s Steve. I’ll see you later tonight sis. It’s good you’re home,” and then he was gone.

“Will, I didn’t just dream that right? Like, he gave me an honest apology?” asked Lucas.

“You definitely weren’t dreaming,” said Will.

“He’s still got some things to work on but he’s trying,” Max said. “And thanks for sort of accepting it I guess.”

“Yeah, ok, I’ll admit I probably shouldn’t have said what I did,” Lucas winced. “But hey! It turned out alright.”

“I guess,” sighed Max. “So, has he been hanging out with Steve a lot?”

Will nodded. “This weekend he spent most of his time with him. I think the only reason he came back for dinner is because he promised mom he’d be around.”

Max smirked at that and the look that Will had on suggested that he knew as well. Lucas was clueless though. “What? What are you guys talking about!”

“Nothing,” laughed Max as she sat back down. “Anyways, we were trying to find a channel to watch right? Let’s see what else is on.”

---

The second day of the trial didn’t end it. More character witnesses were brought in, Susan finally stood up and talked, a few doctors came to argue what had caused Billy’s old injuries, but nothing had been solved.

Billy found himself waiting again. It was easier with Max back in

Hawkins and Steve somehow managed to calm him down in the worst moments but having to wait two more days was still anguish.

It was Friday again, a full week since this had started. Billy hoped to god it would be the last day and it didn't go farther.

Like the last two times, everyone sat behind them as support but he only really had Max to hold onto. He didn't even have that when it came time to finally go on the stand though.

Max actually went first. She held her own against the defense attorney, managing only to get snarky once or twice. Mostly he asked her about what she'd seen and there were only a few quick questions about her altercation with Neil. Billy didn't want to ignore her courage but overall, she was talking about things she'd witnessed, not been put through. Billy could feel his throat becoming tighter and tighter with every second. He didn't want to relive this.

Once Max was sitting down, she reached out and Billy squeezed her hand. Probably too tightly by her expression but Billy couldn't help it. When his name was called out, he felt like he was walking to his execution.

Finally he could see everyone. There was no way to avoid the eyes, the kids and Steve, Joyce, his own father. They were all there, staring at him as his own lawyer went first having been the one to call him to the stand. Billy didn't let himself get too comfortable despite the quick questions and easy answers. He knew the real challenge was when the defense came forward and that was proven with the first one he was thrown.

"You claim that your father hits you but you haven't explained why, during your testimony or in the police interview. For what reason could a loving father hit his son?"

Billy forced air through his nose if only to keep from passing out.

"Billy, if I may call you Billy, you need to answer that. Otherwise, how can the jury find a motive at all?"

The only reason Billy didn't immediately start yelling shit was

because of how dry his throat was. “I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry. Could you speak up for the record?”

“I don’t know.” God it sounded like the fucking lie it was, didn’t it? But Billy couldn’t tell the truth. Just come out in front of all these fucking people? No, it was too much.

“So what? You never thought about it? Did your father never tell you anything as a hint?”

“I don’t remember—”

“You easily remember exactly, in great detail, how your father has harmed you over the years yet you don’t know why? Not even once? Over a decade of this has occurred if your claim is to be believed and you never figured out why?”

“Maybe he just enjoyed it,” Billy spit out.

“Maybe? So you’re basically just saying you still don’t know. Is that correct?”

Billy couldn’t find an answer.

“Well, since you’re being so quiet, how about I talk a little bit. Is that alright Billy? You see, I don’t think this is a case of abuse. I think this is a case of two ungrateful children acting out. After all, where’s the proof? All we have is your word and I think I’ve matched you in just how many words can be given. You say you’re the abused yet we have reports of you playing the bully plenty times over. We have people who have never seen any bad blood between you and your father. So what do you have to say to that?”

“When-when I went to the hospital—”

“It was a sad affair indeed. I don’t think anyone here would say they would want that harm done to a thirteen year old but that’s not the point. The point is, that incident was an unfortunate accident that you are now using against your father for some foolish power play.”

“It wasn’t—”

"Perhaps this entire situation is a bit extreme, but I've seen this kind of case before. Teenage rebellion gone wrong and now you're trying to harm your father as well."

Billy could have sworn there were supposed to be more questions. Not just this fuck talking over and over again. What the hell was going on? What was he supposed to do?!

"You can remember so much about the abuse because you've sat down and planned it out. Didn't you?"

"No—"

"You memorized the words backwards and forwards, made sure you never forgot the number of times he hit you, and that's why it's so easy for you to remember. You didn't think of a reason why a father might hit his son. You simply focused on the goal to ruin your father's reputation, to perhaps even ruin his life."

"It's not—"

"You don't know why he did it because there isn't a reason. You made this all up—"

"I just wanted him to stop!" The shout came out half choked and covered in a sob. "I didn't focus on fucking why I just wanted him to stop!"

"Mr. Hargrove, please, refrain from upsetting this courtroom," the judge said as he banged his gavel.

Billy looked down at his shaking hands that were the only thing holding him up, pressed flat against the wood.

The defense started talking again. "When you attacked your father, you claim it was in self defense. Your step-sister says the same thing, having witnessed it. Why not one punch and run? You beat him until he was black and blue, until he was almost choking on his own blood. Why do that much damage if it was only in self defense? Why not go to the police immediately afterwards? Why hide with Mr. Harrington? What point did that serve at all?"



Billy forced himself to speak if only because it would look worse if he stayed silent. “He wouldn’t have stopped. I didn’t-didn’t know what to do,” he got out in static gasps.

“Could you clarify for the court?”

Billy swallowed. “My father...he would have kept coming after me if he could have. I...I had to make sure he wouldn’t follow to get away at all. And I-I went to Steve’s because I-I had nowhere-nowhere else to go and-and I didn’t know what to do.” He was surprised he’d managed to get it all out though the tears that were still coming.

“Did you ever convince your step-sister that your father was a bad man?”

“She already knew—”

“I asked if you convinced your step-sister to have a negative view of your father.”

“No—”

“So no motive, no physical evidence, no reason for why you should beat your father within an inch of his life. I think the case speaks for itself. No further questions your honor.”

Billy couldn’t bring himself to stop shaking.

“Do you wish to cross examine?”

“No your honor.”

“Then Mr. Hargrove, please remove yourself from the stand.”

They were going to fucking lose because he couldn’t keep his cool. He couldn’t keep Max safe, he still couldn’t stop his dad. He was so fucking worthless!

“Mr. Hargrove—”

Billy ran. It was the only thing he could think to do as he ignored the shouts and the people who stood. He ran out of the room and

collapsed in the hallway, choked sobs coming out as he tried to get in a single breathe.

“Billy! Shit, just breathe ok? Come on, you got this!”

Steve was at his side and Max wasn’t far behind.

“Billy,” she said, “it’s ok. You—”

“It’s fucking over! I fucked it up! I couldn’t-couldn’t keep my-my cool!”

“On the contrary,” came their lawyer’s voice. “That was a spectacular performance.”

Max’s head whipped around. “If you’re going to talk like that you can go screw yourself!”

“I’m only speaking from how the jury will see it. My counterpart hopes the jury will see it as someone breaking down from the weight of his lies. I believe they will see it for what it is. A boy being forced to go through a terrible—”

“Just shut up right now!” yelled Max.

He could feel her hugging him and he buried his face in her hair, sobbing so hard he started to hiccup.

“I-I don’t-don’t want to go-go back in-in there.”

“You don’t have to.” Max glared at their lawyer but she continued talking. “The defense finished their questioning and I see no reason to call you to the stand again. You can wave your right to be present for the rest of the trial or we can postpone for another—”

“No.” Billy quickly shook his head. “Just go ahead. I’m-I’m not going in there again.”

“Alright, in that case we’ll reconvene. Max, do you wish to come in?”

Max hesitated but Steve gripped Billy’s arm. “I’ll stay with him.”

Billy shook his head. "You don't have to—"

"One of us should be in there. It's ok. I'll...I'll be ok," Max said. She squeezed him hard and then quickly jumped to her feet. "Let's finish this."

Billy closed his eyes, his head resting against his knees as Steve pulled him close.

"It'll be ok. It will."

---

Steve was in the hallway by himself when everyone came out. Billy had finally gone off to the restroom, asking to be alone for a moment. Steve looked to the lawyer and then to Hopper. "Well?"

"They gave their final statements. The jury is now in deliberation."

"How long could that take?" asked Steve.

"However long they need," replied Billy and Max's lawyer. "If they don't come to a conclusion before two hours, at that time they'll announce whether or not they haven't come to a decision yet and then reconvene if necessary. It's usually best if you wait here. They'll announce their decision the moment it's made."

Well at least it really was almost over now. The pod people, the trial, this weird ass summer, it was all almost done. But what would their decision be?

When everyone's eyes moved elsewhere, Steve turned around too and saw Billy had come back. He'd paused, eyes still puffy and unsure as ever. Steve knew he was feeling so god damn vulnerable and he probably hated not being in control but with Max in the lead, everyone suddenly rushed him before he could try and distance himself anymore. Even Jonathan and the Chief joined in, dragged over by Nancy and Jane respectively.

"It's going to be ok," Max said again as she squeezed him tight.

"Yeah and I mean, murder is always an option," Dustin said.

“Dustin,” Hopper warned.

“What? I think it’s a great plan,” Dustin grumbled, pressed in between Billy and Joyce.

“Ok, enough with the murder plan, it’s going to be ok guys,” Steve replied, wrapping his arms around the large group.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Jane added.

“Fuck, you guys are saps you know that?” Billy grumbled, trying to wipe away the tears with his shoulder because his arms were pinned tight.

“Well you’re a sap too,” Will said who was hugging Billy from behind.

“Yeah, how you figure that?”

“Because you don’t mind this,” Nancy replied as she squeezed those her arms were wrapped around.

“Bunch of fucking saps,” Billy mumbled again but he hugged them back and finally allowed his head to rest against them.

A few shuttering breathes and quick squeezes and then the large group finally broke apart. Steve rubbed his hand up and down Billy’s back. “Better?”

Billy silently nodded just as the doors to the court room opened up. A man rushed out and quickly said, “The jury has made a decision.”

“It’s been like three minutes,” Billy got out. Steve could feel him freezing again under his touch, the panic immediately back in his eyes and any comfort gone.

“There have been deliberations that were even shorter,” their lawyer answered honestly. “Do you wish to come in?”

Billy shook his head, quick and fast.

Steve gripped his hand. “Do you want me to stay?”

Billy shook his head again. "Tell me what happens. Please."

Steve nodded, squeezing his hand tight before forcing himself to rush back into the court room. The kids and Hopper and everyone else followed and as Steve sat down near to Jonathan, Neil Hargrove turned around in his seat for the first time during the whole trial.

"So you're the fag fucking my son."

Steve froze up. He felt Nancy pressing a hand against him but he honestly had no idea if she was trying to hold him back or just comfort him.

"It's such a fucking waste. The both of you."

"Hey!" growled out Hopper. The shout had Steve jumping as he looked over at the Chief. "You say one more word and you'll lose a tooth."

Neil simply looked Hopper up and down. "A fucking waste," he repeated and then turned back in his chair without another word.

"Steve," Nancy gently tried but he just squeezed her hand.

"Not right now," he whispered just as all the jury members came in.

The judge spoke and then one member stood up, holding a piece of paper in his hand.

Steve felt his guts constrict. He didn't dare to move, fearing he'd break the silence.

"We the jury have come to a verdict in the case of Hargrove vs. Hargrove and Mayfield. We have found the defendant—"

Steve grabbed hold of Nancy and Jonathan.

"Innocent on one account of child abuse."

Oh god no—

"And guilty on one account of child abuse and one account of child

neglect. It is the jury's decision that Neil Hargrove be sentenced for ten years with a possibility of parole in five."

"Yes!"

"Order!" yelled the judge. It took a moment but he finally said, "Jury, thank you for your service today. Neil Hargrove, you are hereby sentenced to prison for ten years with possibility of parole in five. The court is adjourned."

Steve stood up and flicked the man off. It wasn't as satisfying as strangling the guy but it certainly helped. "See you never you piece of shit," and then Steve was the first rushing out of the court room. Outside, Billy was anxiously pacing back and forth before Steve ran into him. Billy stumbled, grabbing hold of Steve for purchase, eyes wide and desperate. "What—"

"Ten years! The son of a bitch is gone!"

Billy grabbed hold of Steve, pulling him closer as his fingers tangled up in hair and gripped the back of his clothes. "Thank you. Oh god, thank you."

"Hey, hey I didn't do anything," Steve murmured as Billy buried his face in Steve's shoulder.

"You were here," countered Billy. "You were fucking here."

And then the flood of their group, their party, their friends, their family came out and they blocked the hallway with their massive hug and tear stained faces full of relief.

---

Two days before school and Max had to say the day was pretty great. Granted, the day Jane was saved and the pod people were permanently blocked out was definitely the top one and the day Neil was sentenced to Jail time was a close contender for the second one. But today...

Max breathed a sigh of relief. She looked up, knowing that at least for the remainder of her school years, she'd never have to see Neil in that place again and it allowed her to breathe easily. Max walked up

the steps and knocked on the door.

She was home.

Her mother rushed her, picking her up in her arms and hugging her so tight. So often Max had seen her mom fussing about looks, often not becoming too emotional or physical so as not to mess up a nice suit and she was amazingly good at keep tears back so as not to ruin make-up. But not today. Today Max felt herself actually being lifted and her lungs crushed but in that completely comforting way.

Everything was finished including the investigation and Max could finally come home.

When her mom finally pulled back, Max smiled up at her. “Hi mom.”

“Hi sweetheart,” she sniffed, wiping away the tears as she finally looked up. “I’m sorry. I’m not—”

“It’s fine. I certainly understand how you feel,” Joyce smiled. She’d driven Max here when the news had been given and behind Joyce was Billy, awkwardly standing there with hands shoved in his pocket. Billy being there wasn’t a surprise, Max had called ahead and had double checked if it was alright if he got the few things of his that had been left behind.

“Please, come in,” her mom quickly said, moving slightly to the side but still keeping a hand on Max, like she was afraid she’d disappear if she didn’t.

When Billy passed, her mom quickly said, “Billy I’m...I’m sorry—”

“It’s fine,” Billy got out with a forced smile. “Things still in my room?”

“Neil got around to bagging most of it up,” her mom admitted. “Some of it he already threw away. I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok. Whatever I find is more than I expected.”

Max looked to her mom and it looked like she’d want to talk to Joyce for a bit so Max pulled herself away, giving her mom a comforting

squeeze. “I’m going to go help him. I’ll be right back.”

She followed Billy to his room, the walls now barren. His bed was stripped, his workout equipment shoved into the closet and five large garbage bags shoved in one corner. Billy let out a soft sigh and sat down, pulling apart the bags as Max went to help him.

A lot of the small things, the pieces that had only been there to please Neil like the sexy posters and shit, they started to shove in one garbage bag for actual trash. The rest of the clothes they divided up between what he wanted and needed and what could actually be thrown away. Max’s mom had already told Billy that he could have his car back and that, since she was now in control of everything while Neil was in jail, she could put it officially in his name so Neil could never take it away before she divorced him.

Max helped Billy take some of the bags out to the trunk of his car. He took a moment to move a hand over the hood of it, with a small smile on his face.

“Why do all boys look half in love with their cars?” snorted Max.

Billy laughed and gave her a playful shove. “Wait until you have your own wheels of freedom. I bet you anything you’ll be a little in love with it too.”

Max rolled her eyes, following Billy back into the house. She didn’t have the strength to grab any of his exercising stuff but she followed him to and fro since it gave her something to do. When it looked like everything he wanted was now in his car, Billy rested against the hood of his car and Max pulled herself up, sitting cross-legged.

In the past few days after the outcome of the trial, Max knew Billy had been with Steve a lot but she also knew he’d been going out with Joyce on several occasions. She hadn’t asked what it was about, not to his face anyway and Will and Jonathan had no idea what they’d been doing.

Max asked, “Are you staying?”

Billy was silent for a moment, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it.



“Maybe. I’ve got this thing that I’m still laying some groundwork on. It kind of depends if Susan helps or not.”

“You talked to her? Just the two of you?”

Billy nodded. “When Joyce talked to her one time. She asked for me. It was really fucking awkward.”

“What did mom want?”

“She uh...she basically said if I need anything I can ask for it and she’ll give it to me. I think she’s trying to say sorry for...well you know,” sighed Billy. “I didn’t really want to and she can still say no but...well I need something if this deal I’m working out is actually going to work.”

“But if it works you can stay.”

Billy nodded. “That’s the idea.”

Max jumped off the car.

“Hey, where the hell are you going twerp?”

Max walked in on her mom and Joyce sitting down to a cup of coffee. Max pointed behind her to Billy who had hurried just behind her. “I don’t know what you’ve been talking about but make sure he stays,” Max said with a definitive nod.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Max, you can’t demand shit like that. Ignore her Susan, she—”

“No, you’re going to stay,” Max said, grabbing hold of his hand. “I still want you here. We need you here. Mom?”

The look on her mother’s face made Max smile. Whatever she’d thought before, Max felt that her mom was finally coming to accept that Billy and Max had found the sibling bond to tie them despite their rocky start.

“Don’t worry Maxine. We’ll figure something out.”

---

It was the day before the kids' first day of high school-what a scary thought that was-as Steve drove up to the Byers. He knew that Billy had been planning on getting his car back. He had no idea if he had but either way it was pointless both of them driving so Steve went up the Byers' driveway all the same. After all, he knew Billy was likely there as he'd still opted to stay with Joyce over going to Susan's, even if they had been talking some. Steve hadn't made plans with him, but a little over a week had passed since Neil's trial and Steve felt like he could finally ask Billy the question that had been on his mind for so long. What's next?

Once at the Byers' house, he didn't see Billy's car and got out just as Joyce came onto the porch.

"Steve, it's good to see you," she said with a smile.

"You too. Billy's here right?"

Joyce's smile changed in a way that immediately had Steve wondering what the hell was up but he didn't say anything as she walked over.

"Not right now, no. He's at Greg's Shop."

It took Steve a moment to remember the mechanic's shop and where it was. "So he did get his car back? Is that why he's there?"

"Something like that," smiled Joyce.

"Well if he's coming back could I wait—"

"I think you should go meet him there."

"Joyce...what's going on?"

"Nothing. I just think you should meet him there. It might take a while and I'm sure he's bored," Joyce smiled. She squeezed Steve's arm and then headed back to her house. "I'll see you later!"

"Uh yeah, bye Joyce," Steve got out. He shook his head, still utterly confused as he slowly got back in the car. He tried to think about why that conversation had felt so off but upon coming up with

nothing, he decided to just go and find Greg's Shop. He'd been there once before to get his tires changed and once back in town, he found it after only one wrong turn.

He spotted Billy's car in the parking lot along with another one being worked on in the garage.

Steve hopped out just as Greg pulled himself out from under the car. "Steve Harrington, it's good to see you kid. Those tires still good?"

"Yeah, they're still fine," Steve replied. "I'm actually—"

"Billy Hargrove. Yeah, he said you'd come. He's upstairs."

"Up-I didn't realize you had an upstairs," Steve honestly answered.

"Technically didn't until this summer. Put the flooring down myself, insulated it. Got it finished about three weeks ago," Greg replied. "The stairs are out back. You can cut through the office if you want."

"Thanks," Steve replied. He was even more confused as he walked into the office and out the back door. He looked at the stairs that were clearly newer than the building itself. They were nicely done and sturdy under his feet as he walked up to the small landing and the newly put in door. Greg must have had a lot of empty attic space seeing as the whole thing seemed to fit with the building rather than it just being a one story with a crawl space.

Steve heard music coming from the other side and he wondered if should knock or not. He hesitated and then decided to just go in, unsure if Billy would hear him anyways over the blasting tones.

Pushing the door open, Steve peaked inside the newly done second story and—

Holy shit. There looked to be two actual rooms on the far side while the rest of the place was wide and open with the support beams clearly showing. It wasn't unfinished though. The place was definitely nicely done and it sure as hell didn't look unlivd in.

Steve's eyes moved over the already messy kitchen, the mattress without a frame, the stereo sitting inside an empty bookshelf with a

box of tapes, the work out equipment, the small table and chairs. It was obvious that things weren't in their perfect place yet and Steve was betting that more things would accumulate after a time to make it more lived in. But the apartment-yeah it was a fully made apartment-had Steve staring as it clicked in his head exactly what this meant.

Just then, one of the doors opened up and out stepped Billy, a large grin coming across his lips. He walked over, turning off the stereo before he stopped in front of Steve.

"So," grinned Billy. "What do you think?"

"You...you have a place! Holy shit-how did this happen?" asked Steve as he looked around again.

"Joyce helped me find it. Apparently Greg has been looking to hire someone full-time since his friend moved off half a year ago and he also did this space up to rent to someone."

"But you don't have any money. Right?"

"Susan actually helped with that. I'll pay her back the moment I can but she gave me a little boost, enough for rent and groceries until I get my first paycheck."

Steve looked around again. "You...you're staying. You're actually staying."

"Ah, what did you think Harrington? That I'd leave you behind?" Billy said. He grabbed hold of Steve's hair and pulled him close. "Not fucking likely."

Steve felt Billy kiss him hard. It was no longer tinged with sadness or hesitation or fear or anything else. For once, Steve could tell there was nothing else on Billy's mind. It was all done and behind them and Billy really could start again.

It was passionate and sloppy and Steve let him drag him over to the bed, both falling on it in a tangle of limbs and more kissing. When Billy moved back a little, he started to mess with Steve's hair, the feeling nice and lazy and Steve looked around again, thinking about

how this was fucking Billy's.

"Christ, I need to catch up," laughed Steve. "I still have no damn job and I'm stuck with my parents."

"You could stay here."

"You're fucking serious."

"God, I love it when you say that word."

"No! Hold on a second, you...what could I possibly say?" laughed Steve. "Hey mom, dad. I know you're already disappointed with me but I'm moving out with no job and I'm mooching off of this guy who lives above a garage."

Billy did that horribly lewd thing with his tongue that Steve was starting to think he didn't really mind at all.

"Alright, yeah. Terrible word choice," Steve snorted as he rolled his eyes. "But even though I'll be eighteen in four days, this isn't going to go well with them."

"Well...how about this," Billy said as he kissed him again. "You find a job if only to make you feel like you're not mooching off of me-though I don't mind that in the slightest just so you know-and then you tell your parents something like...hey. I want to try and become more of an adult and yeah, I don't have a place exactly set up but my very...very good friend Billy doesn't mind helping me out and showing me what it's like to live on my own and then just...never move out."

"You know, it almost sounds plausible the way you say it."

"It's completely fucking plausible," Billy said with another kiss.

"You...actually want me to move in? I...doesn't the thought scare you even a little?" asked Steve. Despite how much he'd loved Nancy, he still hadn't come to the thought of ever moving in with her.

"Listen, I've wasted enough of my life trying to do what people fucking told me to and you know what? Fuck all of them. I want to

keep waking up with you next to me,” Billy shot back. He practically puffed out his chest at that and it felt good seeing Billy so sure of himself, so confident after all the times Steve had seen him defeated and afraid. It was even better seeing this confidence that wasn’t laced with anger and hatred. Billy still deflated a bit though, looking away as he quickly added, “If...if you want to that is.”

“Hell, I...it sounds nice. It sounds really nice,” Steve admitted.

“How about you stay tonight?” asked Billy with a raised eyebrow. “And you know, just see how you like it.”

“Aren’t you working now?”

“I officially start tomorrow.”

Steve laughed and shoved him a bit. “You dick, you planned this didn’t you!”

Billy grinned. “I wanted to make it a surprise.”

“Well it’s a god damn amazing one,” Steve responded. They kissed again, the feeling so new and brilliant. It made Steve never want to stop. Still, a thought did pop into his head as he pulled back. “What about Greg?”

“What about him? Not bad eyes but no offense, I’d like to keep you to myself.”

“You’re awful,” laughed Steve. “No! Just, he’s going to notice me staying. You know?”

“Old school friend of Joyce’s apparently. Real hippie type despite the layer of grease he’s usually under,” replied Billy. He kissed Steve again, tangling his fingers in his hair and resting his forehead against Steve’s. “This is our place. At least...it can be. If you want it to be.”

Steve smiled at that. Considering where his life had been this time last year, Steve could say he’d made a turn so sharply left he was surprised he hadn’t flipped over. But then, he felt comfortable here. He wanted to explore the new possibilities ahead of him. Kind of like how he wouldn’t erase what happened with Nancy even if he could,

he wanted to try this no matter what ending they got.

“Yeah,” Steve smiled, “let’s see where this goes.”

## 11. Epilogue: Graduation of '89

### Notes for the Chapter:

And so this is the final one! A bit shorter but it is the epilogue. I guess I could have ended it in the last chapter but I felt like this kind of rounded the story off better and I did want to theorize where my personal version of these characters might lead to. Anyways, thank you so much for your time. I enjoyed writing this immensely! All the kudos and comments were seriously so uplifting. Thanks for reading and I'm glad you enjoyed!

Billy wiped the summer heat from his forehead. Partially undoing his coveralls, he tied them around his waist and got down on the roller, pulling himself back under the truck. He worked like that for a few minutes when he heard another car pull up. From where he was, he caught a quick glimpse of it and identified it as one of the sheriff's trucks. He grinned and continued the job. He wasn't surprised by the kick he felt and said, "One more minute."

Once he knew the piece was secure, he pulled himself back out to find an utterly shocked Steve.

"Your hair!"

"Oh, yeah. You like it?"

"It's...it's..."

"Almost professional. I know," laughed Billy. "But it's 1989, we got the celebration to go to, and with Greg leaving this place to me I figured it was time for a change. So, what do you think? Come on, be honest."

"It's weird but...yeah it does look good on you," Steve admitted. He reached down and pulled Billy up. "Maybe I should cut mine. I mean, since I am a deputy—"



“Don’t you fucking dare,” Billy responded. “I love your hair and besides, it gives me something to hold on to.”

Steve blushed and pushed him away. “You’re awful.”

“Always. So, which vehicle we taken?”

“It doesn’t matter to me but from your tone of voice, I’m guessing it matters to you.”

Billy grinned. “Damn right Harrington. Please, follow me.”

Steve rolled his eyes as Billy walked to the other end of the shop. There were some spare pieces he had yet to organize along with a large piece of cloth that he pulled off in a flourish. Steve’s eyes went wide.

“You finished the bike?!”

“I finished the bike.”

“Wait...no! No I’m not riding that.”

“Oh yes you fucking are,” grinned Billy.

“I can’t ride up on some motorcycle in my uniform—”

“Are you on duty?”

“Well not now—”

“Then get the hell out of those clothes and find something cool,” Billy replied. “We’re taking the bike.”

“Billy—”

He grabbed Steve by the belt and pulled him in for a long kiss. “We’re taking the bike,” he whispered.

“God I hate you.”

“You love me,” Billy replied with a grin. “Now go find something nice. I’ll be up in a second after I finish this and close the shop.”

“It starts at one right?”

“Yep.”

“And we’re meeting everyone there?”

“No, I thought it might be fun to try and stack everyone on one bike.”

“Alright smartass,” laughed Steve. “I’ll see you upstairs.”

Billy waved him off and went back to putting the finishing touches on the truck, taking it out of the garage, and calling the owner so they could set up a time for him to pick it up. He walked the bike outside too before closing up the place and flipping a sign on the front of the building. The motions were second nature to him now as he locked up and pocketed the keys before going around back.

He’d never thought he’d be ready to run a place all by himself but after Greg had the injury he’d kind of been forced to. Now with Greg’s decision to move down south to where his mother was, it meant Billy had been given two options: help Greg pick out a new manager or run the place himself.

It had been Steve’s and Joyce’s confidence in him that had led to him agreeing to the second offer. It wasn’t official yet but Greg had already let go of the place about a week ago just so Billy could see what running it was like. Considering Hawkins had grown in the past four years and not shrunk, Billy was thinking he’d probably need to hire someone but for the moment he focused on the feeling of being his own boss. A few weeks shy of twenty-two and running a place like this? Talk about being fucking lucky.

With everything closed and covered, Billy walked around back and up the stairs. The bathroom and the closet were still the only completely closed off areas. The bed still didn’t have a frame but there were actual sheets and pillows on it now. A nice, large carpet underneath it also sectioned off the area as their bedroom. On the right side of the bed was a small side table with a lamp.

The couch was between Billy and the bed with the TV right in front of that and a bookshelf against the wall to the couch’s left. The stereo

sat there, now surrounded by books and cassettes and tapes and trinkets and a few vinyl records as well. The turntable was by it and now that Billy had the room, he'd been focusing more on the vinyl than the cassettes. They only had one CD but no player to play it on—literally the stupidest present Billy had ever gotten.

On the right side of the room were the kitchen and the dining area. The only reason the kitchen wasn't a permanent mess was because Steve took time to clean it up. The brown dining table was bigger than the one Billy had first had and could seat up to six if necessary. If the whole family came over though, everyone often just spread out on the floor, wolfing down whatever Steve had made.

Some chests for storage were off near the back along with their exercising equipment neatly put up and still enough space to use it. Besides the phone that hung on the wall, they were also covered in posters except for one section where the kids had gone ham with the paint. There was a small section that Will had done, painting out the alphabet and stringing up lights over each one. Just in case. Lights were also strung up on the ceiling as well, less as a fashion statement and more as a nice big warning sign in case anything Upside Down related or other dimensional in general happened.

Things had surprisingly been calm in the past four years, except of course the whole Big Foot thing. Billy still didn't think the thing had actually been Big Foot but it sure as hell had been close enough. They'd never found out where it came from, putting it down after the third murder, but no more of the things appeared. There had also been that summer trip spent looking for Jane's sister but since Jane was still cut off from the dark place, they hadn't had any luck and could only hope the two would find each other again. Other than that, the supernatural side of Hawkins had stayed mercifully quiet.

Billy walked over to the stereo, popping in Deep Purple In Rock. A bit old school but still a fantastic fucking album. Steve popped his head out from the closet, pulling out a shirt. "This better?"

"Hell yeah. I'm going to take a shower. Be out in a second."

Billy went in and quickly stripped. He stood under the water, getting off the grease and some remaining hairs from when he'd gotten his

hair cut earlier. It no longer felt weird doing this. Being domestic and independent and having Steve there too. Steve being Hopper's deputy always made Billy a little anxious on the nights when he was late or didn't call considering what Hawkins was really like, but Billy was happy for him and besides, being a deputy surprisingly fit him a hell of a lot better than working for his fucking dad.

A lot had fucking changed from high school but then, high school wasn't the real world, was it? Not much that that happened there counted in the long run and Billy imagined if he'd never gotten stuck in the dark place, he might very well be dead in a ditch by this point in his life.

It wasn't even a joke. He'd been spiraling out of control, damaging himself and everything in his path. Now he was happy. Fucking happy! Who would have ever thought that?

Billy got the rest of the grease off, cleaned his skin, and threaded his fingers through his hair. When he got out, he rubbed away the fog on the mirror and messed with his hair for a bit. It felt wrong not being able to feel it on his neck but at the same time it already felt cooler. The scar from the surgery was far more noticeable but if anything, it just made him look badass. He could appreciate that now what with the healing and the passage of time.

He messed with his hair a bit before just combing it back into what the barber had done earlier and smiled. Not bad. Now that he was really looking, he looked more like he was nearly twenty-two and not just some punk. The added authority it would give him over the garage made him smile and he walked over to the closet, flipping through clothes as Steve sat in the kitchen eating a sandwich.

Bloodsucker finished on the cassette and Child In Time came on as Billy found the jeans and shirt he wanted. He went to one of the chests next, finding the one with his jewelry in it. He still wore most of the pieces. It just wasn't a great idea to keep those items on when working.

He pulled on the bracelet Max had given him first before finding a good earring to put in, two rings and a necklace. When he looked up, Steve was staring again.

“What?”

“No more mullet. Christ it’s going to take me a while,” Steve laughed. “You sure I shouldn’t cut my own—”

“No,” Billy repeated with a small smirk. “No way in hell.”

“Ok ok, I’ll stop trying,” laughed Steve. He finished off the sandwich and as he threw the plate in the sink, added, “Do we have to go on the bike?”

“I spent the last three months fixing that thing up and now you’re suggesting I don’t use it? That hurts.”

“I’m not saying you can’t use it! But why do I—”

Billy sauntered forward. “Because think of just how cool we’ll look.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I think the idea of cool has long since passed me by.”

“Because you’re constantly in that uniform looking like a mini-Hopper?”

“Should I read into that?”

“No,” laughed Billy. “Just...please? It’s three miles tops. It’s not even that far.”

“Do you even have helmets?”

“I’ll get them tomorrow.”

“Billy, that’s illegal.”

“I didn’t hear a no.”

“Illegal should equate to no,” groaned Steve.

“Illegal just means it’ll be a bit of a challenge. Don’t act all high and mighty on me. I stole the title of Keg Stand King from you when we were seventeen.”

“I am a deputy!”

“Who has also helped with covering up very illegal government work since he was sixteen. You’re not exactly captain of the moral police. Come on Steve!”

“You make it sound like I had a choice in it.”

“Come on!” Billy begged again. “I’ll have the helmets by tomorrow. Promise! Just for today. Please.”

Steve shook his head. For a split second, he looked almost like he was going to argue but then he just let out a begrudging sigh and rolled his eyes. “Just because I say yes doesn’t mean I’ll enjoy it.”

Billy let out a cheer. He sat down on the couch and quickly pulled on some shoes. “This is going to be fucking great. Come on, let’s go so we can get good seats.”

“Now?”

“Yes now! I promised Max we’d be in the front row. Come on,” he replied. He stood up and went to stop the cassette before he picked up his sunglasses and popped them on.

Steve rolled his eyes and Billy just grinned. He grabbed his keys and headed out the door and down the steps, Steve right behind. Billy hopped on the bike, turning it on before he gestured to Steve to get on too.

“Come on, just wrap your arms around me,” Billy said. “Remember to lean with me too unless you want us to go tumbling off.”

“Christ I’m going to die.”

Billy laughed and knocked up the kick stand. He let out a triumphant cry and then shot out into the streets, Steve’s grip immediately tightened. At the first red light, Billy patted his arm, both being comforting and patronizing in the same motion.

“You’re doing great honey.”

“Asshole.”

Billy laughed again, quickly going once the light turned green. They parked in the high school parking lot, the graduation ceremony being held on the football field considering the good weather they'd been having. There were already a fair few people there but still empty seats in the front as Steve and Billy headed over.

Billy propped his sunglasses on the top of his head, looking around until he spotted Dustin's mom. Considering all the driving around Steve had done for the kid until he'd gotten his first car-and honestly even after that-Steve and Billy had gotten to know Mrs. Henderson fairly well. She waved them over and they sat down just as Nancy and Jonathan showed up.

Billy hugged Nancy as hard as he could after Steve. It had been months since either of them had last seen her though they had spoken regularly on the phone. “How's UC? What about that internship at the Chicago Sun-Times? You still got that, right?”

“As far as school goes, from the looks of it, I may be able to graduate early next semester,” grinned Nancy. “But the internship has been great! No matter what I do, they've assured me I'll have a job there once I graduate.”

“That's awesome,” said Steve.

“Yeah, who would have thought you'd make a great journalist,” grinned Billy.

Nancy nodded. “Oh! And we have news.” She quickly took Jonathan's hand.

Billy and Steve looked between each other and at the same time asked, “You're getting married?”

Jonathan immediately blushed and Nancy quickly shook her head, looking equally amused and embarrassed. “What! Oh-uh. No. No um...since Jonathan finished his three year program, he applied to CST and...well...”

“Shit Jonathan, finally coming back to hang out with us huh!”

laughed Billy as he clapped Jonathan on the back. "Congratulations. So you take the pictures and Nancy writes about it, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that," Jonathan agreed with a small smile.

"I know your mom and brother will appreciate you being closer," added Steve. "It'll be nice having you back in the area."

Jonathan nodded as they sat down again.

The Wheelers came soon afterwards, everyone saying hi to little eight year old Holly who Nancy pulled into her lap and hugged tight.

"Mike will be an adult now?" she asked.

Nancy laughed. "Almost. He's still got a bit of growing to do."

Susan came next and everyone shifted so she could sit next to Billy. They certainly hadn't become friends but perhaps good acquaintances was more accurate. Billy certainly didn't mind her and she sure as hell had helped him in the past years. Besides, she'd kept her promise about Max. She'd kept her safe and that was all Billy could have asked of her.

The Sinclairs were next, everyone politely smiling and saying hello just as Hopper and Joyce joined them too. Jonathan kissed Nancy's cheek and then they shifted again so he could sit next to his mom.

Billy looked over at them, still dumbfounded about what had blossomed between Joyce and the Chief but hey, if it made them happy...

And with that, it seemed like their entire group had taken up the front row along with the extended family. They continued to chat until it seemed about to begin. Billy couldn't believe he was sitting here, getting ready to cheer his sister on for graduating high school. What a different fucking chapter this would be.

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Max hugged Jake. "If we don't see each other the summer we can always meet up on campus. Yeah?"



“Sounds great. We’re going to blow them away with our game design.”

“Hell yeah!”

Max and Jake did their secret handshake before he waved goodbye and rushed to his place in line.

To say things had remained the same for four years would have been an outright lie. Maybe it was just because she’d started late and hated Hawkins near the beginning but high school had ended up being far easier than middle school. Though the party had always remained her closest friends, Max knew that she’d pulled away throughout the years, finding her own interests and just trying to figure what the hell she wanted to do with her life.

It was the same for everyone. Despite being the losers in middle school, there were so many more niches to be found now that they were older.

And of course, the majority of them were moving away. Max had wondered if they’d all remain stuck in Hawkins forever. In some ways, she’d wanted that but it just wasn’t realistic. Her mother was even thinking about leaving now, following another job opportunity. Max would always return, for Billy and Steve, for Joyce and Hopper, for Will and Jane, the only two not immediately running off to college. But last year she’d sat down with all her friends and they’d had a good long talk about it after a few upsets and fights had occurred.

They had to accept that they would always be tied together in ways other people would just never understand, but they had new friends too and weren’t the social piranhas they’d been in younger years. Max sure as hell wasn’t a party animal, she hadn’t picked up that bad habit from Billy at least, but she had found her own group of friends somewhat separate from *the party*.

Mike, Jane, and Will had probably remained the closest to each other but even Mike was going off to college too, even if his was only three hours away rather than another state like some.

Still, no matter how far apart they went physically, Max knew they'd always remain the greatest friends she ever had.

Max chatted a bit with those around her, looking behind to wave at Lucas and waving ahead at Dustin and Jane. She could see Will near the very front and Mike all the way at the back. Max shook her hands to get out the anxiety and excitement. It was both an incredible high and a terrifying thought that she was about to finish high school.

The getting the diploma part was going to be great. The actual ceremony aspect people talked out of their ass and made high school seem like some transcendent experience rather than the pretty normal and overly bland place it was. During that part, Max would have to try not to fall asleep but when she walked out and saw Billy and everyone else, that did brighten her mood again and she quickly waved as she went past.

Billy pointed to his hair and then hers before giving her a thumbs up. She grinned. It seemed they'd both had similar ideas, her cropped and loose hair bouncing around her ears from under her cap.

Max sat down amongst her fellow classmates and watched the good, the bad, and the utterly boring teachers walk over to theirs. The principle talked first and then the teachers. The valedictorian went next along with a few random people that Max didn't know. She quietly talked to those around her to keep herself entertained until finally they announced the diplomas would be passed out and all the students stood.

Max screamed and cheered when Will walked across and then Dustin and Jane. She cheered for a few of her other friends before she was almost right up on the stage. Once there, she heard multiple screams of, "Yeah Mad Max!" the most clear one coming from Billy. Max lovingly showed him the middle finger as she went by. Ok, so she hadn't gotten his partying habits but he'd definitely been an influence.

Max sat back down and made sure to cheer on her other friends but again yelling extra loud for Lucas and Mike. Two more people went after Mike and once everyone was seated, the principle went to the podium again.

“Class of ’89, please rise. I hereby announce all of you graduates of Hawkins High!”

Max yelled into the air, throwing up her cap before grabbing hold of those closest to her. She jumped up and down, slapped a few people on the back, high-fived others, and then rushed off to look for the party.

She spotted Mike and Lucas in the throng of people at a distance but before she could make her way to them, she felt two arms come around her and pull her off her feet. She screamed over the heavy laughter and once her feet hit the ground, she spun around and hit Billy in the shoulder.

“You are such an asshole!” she laughed.

“Ah come on, I couldn’t help myself,” Billy grinned, grabbing her and pulling her into a tight hug. “Christ, I’m so proud of you. My fucking sister is a god damn genius.”

“I am not a genius,” snorted Max.

Her mom popped up, a proud smile on her face. “You shouldn’t downplay your skills. You have a full-ride after all.”

“People get full-rides all the time. If I’d graduated a doctor or something at age ten, then I’d be genius.”

“Alright smartass but you’re still fucking brilliant,” grinned Billy.

“I’m just still worried that you’re putting all your programming skills into games,” her mom said. She always had that pursed look when Max’s current career path came up. However, Max was eighteen and had officially accepted entrance into the college of her choice, and considering her mom could hardly stop her now, Max didn’t get irritated like she usually did.

“At least I’m not running off to LA to be a stripper,” Max shrugged.

Her mom groaned and Billy wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “You know, I’m happy you’re going back to Cali. It gives me a good excuse to finally drag Steve over there.”

"I still can't believe he missed out on the summer trip for work. Or that winter one we took this year," Max agreed.

"We'll drag his pasty ass out there eventually," Billy replied just as Dustin's head suddenly appeared in the crowd.

"Hey! We still meeting at the diner!?" he yelled out.

"That's the plan!" Max called back. "See you guys there! And then your place, right Billy?" She'd already had a nice congratulatory dinner with her mom the night before so she didn't feel so bad ditching her. When Billy nodded in agreement, she quickly added, "Mom, it's alright if I spend the night if it gets late yeah?"

She'd done it before on occasion but her mother had never felt truly comfortable. Before she could try and make an excuse for Max to come home though, Billy tightened his grip around her and said, "Don't worry Susan. I'll keep an eye out for her."

Her mom asked, "But Steve still lives with you?"

"He does but you know he's an upstanding man Susan. Besides, don't worry, I hear his heart's taken."

Max quickly hid the snort behind her hands.

"Oh, really? Do you know her name?"

"No idea. He's pretty shy about it," smirked Billy. "But don't worry, Max will be fine as always. Won't you Max?"

"Yeah mom, it's really not the issue you make it out to be."

"Well...alright. But call me tomorrow if you decide not to come home in the morning."

"I will mom," Max said, going in for a hug before she waved goodbye and turned back to Billy. She elbowed him in side. "So his heart is taken huh?" she asked with a wink.

"You fucking know it." Suddenly his focus went elsewhere and he nudged her. "I'll catch you at the diner, yeah? Guessing you're going

with him?”

Max followed his line of sight and saw Lucas. “That’s the plan. I’ll see you there.”

Billy nodded and disappeared into the crowd as Max made her way to Lucas. Billy had remained a bit distant of Lucas compared with all the others but it was only because of the guilt that was still there for threatening him. Of course, now Lucas could probably hold his own, if not beat Billy, in a fight. Not that Max had to worry about that. They were on good standing with each other even if they didn’t hang out often.

“Hey Lucas, already met with your family?” smirked Max, noting the added stickers on his robes. Probably his sister’s doing.

“Yeah, you ready to go too?”

Max nodded and they headed to her car, having gone together to the graduation. They both tossed their robes and caps into the backseat. Max also quickly threw off the blouse she’d been wearing to reveal the plain gray shirt underneath. Her mom had forced her to wear it because she’d said it was more proper for graduation. Max understood her mother’s thought process even less though since her mom had seen her five minutes and she’d had her robe on the entire time. Oh well, it was over with now and she adjusted her shirt a bit before closing the back door.

When they got in, Max didn’t immediately put the keys in, pausing to look over at Lucas. They’d kind of been ignoring the blaring question in the room. One look at Lucas showed that they’d come to a similar consensus: they couldn’t put this off for much longer.

“So.../So...”

They both stopped and Max rolled her eyes. “Shit, this isn’t easy.”

“We knew it wouldn’t be,” sighed Lucas. He looked away for a moment and then quickly mumbled, “Maybe I could get transferred at some point. You know, once I get more in the groove of things and stuff?”

“Or if I could find a company nearby, maybe I could apply for a job after graduation?”

They both stopped. The uncertainty, the utter cluelessness, it was so damn obvious and Max couldn't help but laugh, Lucas quickly doing the same. “We...why didn't we do what all our parents did?”

“Because I don't know about yours but going by mine, we'd end up unhappy as hell and divorced in six years,” sighed Max. “I don't want to give up my chance in LA.”

“And I really...really want to be a cop,” Lucas softly agreed. “I just...”

“I don't want you starting out in a city you're not comfortable in,” Max replied, already knowing what Lucas was about to say.

“Yeah, and I don't want you risking a lesser education just to follow me,” sighed Lucas. “Though...it seems like Nancy and Jonathan made it work when he was at NYU and she in Chicago.”

Max nodded. “That doesn't mean we're them though.”

“You're totally right. God, why couldn't we all just stay here?”

“Be careful what you wish for. We could all end up in some pocket universe or frozen in time or some shit knowing this place.”

“And that is why I want to leave,” snorted Lucas.

Max held up her pinky. “With any luck, neither of us will find ourselves in another supernatural pocket of hell.”

Lucas wrapped his pinky around hers. “And if any of us do, the party will come running to the aid.”

“Always,” Max agreed. They both moved in for a slow, final kiss before pulling back to hug each other tightly. When they moved away, Max already felt better, glad they'd talked now rather than waiting last minute. “You have to mail me your number the moment you get settled though.”

Lucas nodded. “I still got your new address saved on paper.”

Max smiled and turned her car on, finally moving out of the parking lot. "You're still ok with Dustin giving you a ride afterwards?"

"We were going to hang out a bit before I went to dinner with my parents anyways."

"Ok cool. Just wanted to double check."

They talked a bit about the group trip they were doing and a few other small summer plans before everyone left. It didn't take long to get to the diner and Max could see one familiar car there. She jumped out with Lucas at her side, hurrying in to hug both Jane and Will since she hadn't gotten a chance after the principle's final words.

Even before it became obvious the Chief and Joyce were together, Will and Jane had become fast friends. Whenever Mike wasn't around to help Jane acclimate to school life, she went to Will and the friendship had turned into an incredibly sibling like bond.

They were both taking a gap year rather than going straight into college. For Will, it was more because he still wasn't completely sure what he wanted to do and he didn't want to leave his mom yet. For Jane, it was because Hopper didn't want her out on her own and Jane actually kind of agreed with him. From the sounds of it though, Jane might end up going to the same place as Mike and Hopper and Joyce may even go with them.

It made Max wonder what it would mean for Steve if the Chief left and if Will would follow them by that time or choose his own path. For the moment, it didn't matter though. The whole idea was still up in the air and wouldn't happen for some time.

After getting hugs and hearing the word 'congratulations' for the tenth time, they headed over to the big curved table that had enough room for Mike and Dustin once they arrived too. She also waved to Dr. Owens and seeing as Joyce and Hopper immediately sat down, she assumed they'd planned the meet-up. She definitely didn't mind Dr. Owen now and no one else did either. Besides, it was sometimes really fucking useful having a government trained doctor for both unusual and normal circumstances. Joyce and Hopper had seemed to properly befriend him as well and the three had often been seen in

this same diner or down at the bar having lunch.

Max looked outside at the sound of more cars coming up and smiled as she saw everyone else arrive.

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Billy waved over to Hopper and the others, and slid into a booth next to Max's. Dustin and Mike quickly jumped in the larger booth while Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve slid in. A waitress came over, taking everyone's orders one by one and when she left, Nancy leaned forward.

"You know, I don't think I ever asked, but why does my mom always act so weird around you?" asked Nancy, referring to their small interaction on the football field. "The first few times I thought I was imagining it but it happened even today."

"Oh yeah," muttered Billy. "It's probably because of that time I flirted with her in her bathrobe."

"What!?" the chorus of noise came from both their table and Max's.

Mike pulled himself over, shoving his face between Steve's and Billy's. "Uh, why!"

"Chill kid. Max was missing and I had to pull everything out to find her," replied Billy. "Oh yeah! That was the same night I beat your face in and Max knocked me out with that needle-hang on. I don't think any of you told me what the hell was in it."

A woman turned around at the counter with a wide eyed look. Billy waved her away without a care. "Inside joke."

"I don't remember," Jonathan slowly said, clearly latching onto the part that was more comfortable for him. "It's been years."

However, his words were mostly overshadowed by Nancy's groan as she leaned back and covered her face. "Oh god that's so creepy!"

"Hey!" said Billy. "It's not like—"

"Not you!" cried Nancy. "My mom! God, you-you were seventeen!"



And-and oh lord! My mom was over forty!”

“Hmm, maybe that was bit creepy...”

Nancy let out another groan as Mike slumped between them. “I’ll never be able to look her in the eyes. Oh god.”

“You’re both drama queens,” muttered Billy as he shoved Mike back onto his side. “It was four years ago! What I want to know is what the hell was in that damn syringe.”

“Not a clue,” said Max.

Dustin nodded. “I just remember Max being really badass.”

Billy rolled his eyes and they all laughed, turning back around and talking to each other for the next hour. By that point, everyone started to peel off one by one. Hopper had to leave first and get back to work since he was technically only on an extended lunch break and then some of the kids left, Dr. Owens and Joyce said their goodbyes, and finally Billy turned in his seat and asked Max. “You ready to head out?”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll see you guys later.”

He turned back around to give a quick goodbye to Nancy and Jonathan but thankfully they still had some off time before they both had to get back to their jobs. They’d be able to meet up again.

Once on the motorbike with Steve, Max rode behind them the few miles it took. They parked out back behind the garage and Steve all but scrambled off the bike.

“You know,” said Max. “I saw a hoard of demodogs come at you once and yet I think that scared you more.”

Steve just shook his head. “You can keep it if you want, but I am never getting on that damn thing again.”

Billy laughed, walking up the steps and unlocking the door. “You’ll get used to it.”

“I most certainly won’t.”

Max laughed as well, quickly asking, “So Steve, are you joining us for the movie?”

They walked inside as Steve shook his head. “First off, no. You two can go enjoy your horror movies all by yourself.”

“Ah, but you came with us to see *Aliens*,” Max replied.

“Yeah and I have never regretted a decision more,” groaned Steve.

Billy grinned. “You know, I think they’re making a third one. It can’t be as good as the second one, that’s just too damn lucky for a series, but you did promise you’d see any sequels with us.”

“And when the third *Alien* comes out I will reluctantly follow,” groaned Steve. “But you two enjoy your love of horror all by yourself. Besides, I promised my parents I’d have dinner with them tonight.”

Billy groaned as a light went on in Max’s eyes. “I know you don’t hate them or anything but you actually used your parents as an excuse not to go?!”

“What! No!” defended Steve. “They’re god damn retiring early and moving out of state. Apparently my dad was staying on because he was assuming I’d join him in the business but since I haven’t faltered as deputy in the last three years, well I think they just gave up.”

“I’m just happy they’re leaving,” groaned Billy. “Did I tell you I ran into your mom in the grocery store? Not even a god damn hello. She just jumped straight into ‘has Steve moved out yet’, ‘when is Steve moving out’, ‘it’s been so long and Steve still hasn’t moved out’.”

Max laughed at the exaggerated, high pitch tone Billy had taken.

“I don’t think she’s said hi once! She acts like it’s my fault you’re still here.”

Steve rolled his eyes, leaned in, and quickly kissed Billy. “Well technically it is.”

“Oh fuck off. I’m just happy they’re leaving. And before you even talk about visiting them, if you can take time off visiting them then we can take a god damn vacation to Cali!”

“Fine! I won’t go visit them until we’ve had a proper vacation. How does that sound?”

“Finally,” sighed Billy.

Steve rolled his eyes, checking his watch before he added, “Are you two eating before or after the movie?”

“Why?” asked Max. “Going to try and save me from Billy’s cooking? Whip me up something quick?”

Billy snorted. “Like I was going to cook. I have three bags of chips, a box of cookies, and some beers.”

“Billy!”

“Oh calm down Steve. You know they all drink at least a little.”

Steve just let out another groan. “Whatever. Never mind. Enjoy the crap food. I’ll probably be back by seven, maybe seven-thirty tonight.”

“You know, we’re probably not going until about half past six. Want to come with—”

“Nooooo thank you,” Steve got out. “I’ll see you both later.”

“Bye Steve!” Max called after him as he walked out. She turned to Billy with a grin. “So are we seeing *Pet Sematary*, *The Horror Show*, or *Fright Night 2*?”

“*Fright Night*’s just going to be a ridiculous laugh,” replied Billy. “If I’m going to sit through a vampire movie it has to be good, like *The Lost Boys*.”

“You have the tape. We could just re-watch that.”

“Yeah but this is the last week *Pet Sematary* is showing.”

“True...and I do think that has more story than *The Horror Show*. That one just sounds like it’ll be a bunch of idiots running around getting machetes stuck in their skulls.”

Billy laughed at that. “*Pet Sematary* it is. There’s a showing at six forty-five but we could go to one right now, get back here about when Steve will.”

“And force him to finally watch *The Lost Boys*?”

“I didn’t even think about that but I like how you think,” grinned Billy. “Come on sis, we’ll take the bike.”

“Really?!”

“Ah, don’t tell me—”

“No, that’s great! Come on let’s go!”

Billy laughed at her excited face. He grabbed his keys again and they quickly went back out, walking over to the bike.

“God, you did an amazing job on this! Imagine taking that out to the boardwalk or something.”

“I’d have to put it in the back of Steve’s truck or hitch it up. No way would he let me ride it out all the way to LA.”

“Well, maybe we both could go on the bike and he could follow,” grinned Max. “It could be a pretty cool road trip.”

“You’ll have to help me convince him.”

“I think with both of us we could.”

“We could definitely try,” agreed Billy as he got on. He helped Max figure out the best way to get comfortable before he revved the engine and went down the street. They actually had two movie theaters now and Billy headed to the one that still had *Pet Sematary*.

Going to the movies had just become their sort of thing over the years, particularly horror. They never got scared, probably an after

effect to the monsters they'd dealt with. Maybe it should have or at least bring back bad memories but they just didn't. They were more therapeutic than anything though they always agreed they needed a good story first.

Since they went early, they got out just before six thirty and quickly headed back to the garage. Billy set up the pullout couch as he usually did for Max or anyone who stayed over. Max found the VHS tape and then gathered up the spare sheets.

As they set everything up, Max asked, "Are you going to change the name of the place? I mean, you can't really call it Greg's if Greg isn't here."

"Well I sure as hell can't go call it Billy's Garage," he snorted. "It makes me sound like some god damn hick."

Max let out a belly like laugh. "I never thought of that! Ha! You're lucky you don't have a southern accent."

"I think I'd cry if I did," snorted Billy.

"Well what are you going to call it then?"

"Not a clue. How about you get the party together and come up with some working titles. We can try and decide one by the end of the summer and make a new sign."

"You should have Will design it. It'll give him something to do."

Billy thought about that. He'd have to pay him for that, no way would he have the kid just do it for free. Besides, maybe getting a paying job would boost the kid's confidence. "That's not a bad idea Max. Mention it to Will next time you see him."

"I will," she grinned, finally kicking off her shoes and falling back on the pullout. Billy grabbed the controller and pressed play, getting comfortable next to her. The trailers were still playing when Steve got home.

"Weren't you guys going to a movie?"

“Went early,” said Billy. He scooted over and grabbed up some of the snacks, leaving space in the middle for Steve. Talking over the trailers, Billy asked, “How were the parents?”

“Not that you really care but fine. Dad didn’t try to do a last ditch effort to get me to work with him or something which was nice. Seems like he’s completely given up on that,” sighed Steve. He grabbed a beer and cracked it open. “What are you watching?”

“Just a movie we’ve seen a bunch. Want to join?”

“Hmm...you’re ignoring the question. Seems suspicious...”

“He’s onto us Max! Grab him!”

“Hey!”

Billy managed to pluck the beer from Steve’s hand so it didn’t spill everywhere as he and Max wrestled him onto the pullout. “God you guys are awful! What is it? *Hellraiser*? *A Nightmare On Elm Street*?”

“*The Lost Boys* actually,” grinned Billy. “I’ll just tell you to close your eyes when they start eating the drunk punks. And it’s more like *Silver Bullet* than *The Evil Dead* if that helps.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “That’s better at least.”

Billy laughed again, pulling Steve in close as they all leaned back and the film finally started. When the three of them fell asleep, it was the ideal end to a night. Even if Steve woke up with an elbow shoved in his cheek, a knee in his gut, and two siblings snoring softly on either side.